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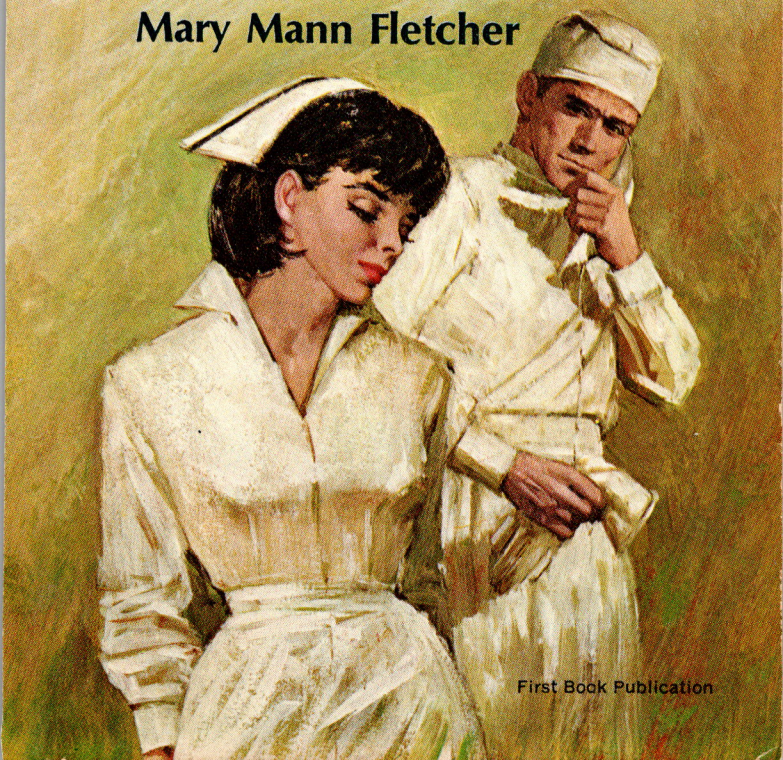
Could her love thaw his frozen heart?

DANGER—NURSE AT WORK

Mary Mann Fletcher



First Book Publication

"I love it here, Bob," Kathy said. She was stranded in a tiny cabin, high in the snowy Colorado mountains, with Dr. Robert Carter, and there was no place else she would have rather been.

Bob's arms tightened about her. "I feel the same way. I keep forgetting there ever was a time we weren't here, alone together, with the rest of the world shut out."

Then, suddenly, he was moving away from her towards the window, and saying in a flat voice, "But it's not real. This isn't the real world. Come on, there's a jeep coming for us, and it's a long ride back to civilization."

A long ride but a short fall, thought Kathy bitterly. For a while she had forgotten everything except that she was alone with the man she loved. But then everything had changed and Bob had gone back to the world where he was a highly competent doctor, and she was just a romantic interlude in his busy, purposeful life.

How could she have ever thought he loved her?

DANGER— NURSE AT WORK

by

MARY MANN FLETCHER

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I

IT WAS A COLD clear day with a hint of snow in the air. Kathy Frame loosened the collar of her newly-acquired fur coat and raised her face to the sun which was bright about her, its brilliance reflected by the snow-covered mountains that ringed the airfield.

She was a petite redhead with the kind of features called piquant and a figure that curved in all the right places. On the surface, she might have been a big-eyed schoolgirl on a holiday or an engaged teenager, but she was neither of these, and if anyone had taken the trouble to look beneath the sparkle of her warm brown eyes, he would have seen the underlying seriousness there, plus quite a large amount of apprehension. For Kathy Frame was a registered nurse and she was reporting for her first job here in western Colorado.

It was the first time in her life she had ever been any further west than Albany, New York, and any higher than the observation tower at the Empire State Building. Right now she was trying to sort out fact from fancy, to find out if what people back home had told her was true of this wild and alien country.

As Kathy walked from the plane to the airline terminal building, she reflected that it was much warmer than she had expected to find it this far north and in the dead of winter, and although the thermometer hovered near zero, she didn't feel at all cold. Perhaps she would feel quite at home here after all, in spite of the qualms she had felt on the plane.

Now she eyed the people hurrying about the big room, meeting other people or being met by them, walking out through the big door towards a waiting plane or patiently awaiting the announcement of their flights. She was surprised to see the women so stylishly dressed, the men so well groomed and also dressed in the height of fashion. Some of the men wore rather broad-brimmed hats and here and there a highly-polished cowboy boot peered from beneath a well-tailored trouser cuff, but on the whole, they might have been New Yorkers or Chicagoans or even proper Bostonians.

Well, what did you expect, for heaven's sake, a gunfight in the airline terminal building? she asked herself amusedly, remembering her mother's television-inspired fears and apprehensions about her only child's venturing forth into the wild and uncharted West.

Of course, when the letter had come from a place called Gunshot, Colorado, that had been Kathy's first reaction too. She had mentally pictured herself in her nurse's uniform astride a pinto pony (whatever on earth that was), with her cape flying in the wind, being chased by a band of painted Indians. Immediately, her good sense had taken over, but not before she had felt a flutter of fear behind her sternum.

It had taken a good deal longer to convince her mother that this was not an invitation to a scalping or an ambush in a range war.

"This man, this Donald Lightfoot, that sounds like an Indian name," her mother kept insisting all during Kathy's correspondence with her prospective employer. "I can't understand why the supervisor of nurses recommended you for the job, going off into the wilderness with an Indian. Resort, indeed," she sniffed. "More likely some horrible little saloon with rooms upstairs where you'll be expected to nurse men who've been wounded in gunfights. Or worse. I positively refuse to allow you to go."

"Mother," Kathy had replied patiently for perhaps the hundredth time, "Mr. Lightfoot is a very rich and respectable man and Lightfoot Lodge is one of the best known resorts in that country. Miss Murdoch knows him personally. She spent her last vacation out there."

"But he *is* an Indian," her mother persisted.

Kathy laughed. "Miss Murdoch says he's only about one-eighth Indian and he changed his name from Jones to Lightfoot because no one would believe him. Honestly, westerners are proud of their Indian blood. And Indians are quite civilized these days, Mother—truly they are. The days of Indian ambushes and range wars and gunfighting in the streets are alive only in the movies and on television now."

"I still don't know why Miss Murdoch recommended you, though," her mother persisted stubbornly. "A girl who was born and brought up in New York, how you can be expected to survive in that wild country—" Here her voice trailed off as she contemplated movie and television-born horrors.

Kathy grinned. She knew very well why Miss Murdoch had recommended her for the position of nurse at Lightfoot Lodge. It was because she had, unbeknownst to her mother, turned down at least half a dozen other jobs, including that

of staff nurse at York Memorial Hospital, where she had trained. She'd had a host of excuses on her lips each time but what they amounted to was—no adventure. And Miss Murroch knew it.

What Kathy really wanted was to enter the Army Nurse Corps, but she wasn't old enough, having entered training at barely seventeen.

"I think you'll like it at Lightfoot Lodge, the job seems made to order for a scatterbrain like you, Kathy," Miss Murdoch had said fondly. "The pay is more than what you'd make in a hospital, and with room and board furnished, you'll be able to save just about all of it. The best part is it's only for skiing season. By the time you've had your fill of adventure and are yearning for the bright lights of New York City, you'll be headed for home, ready to take one of those dull hospital jobs, which I suspect you won't find half so dull as you expect."

Kathy smiled back at the supervisor of nurses, wondering how Miss Murdoch knew what had been in her mind all along. Oh, it wasn't that she found nursing dull per se. It was quite the contrary. Kathy loved her profession with a passion, loved the constant challenge it offered her in the day-to-day battle against needless suffering and death. But all her life had been spent in New York City. Why, she'd never even been out of the county except once when she'd gone to summer camp and that had been only in upstate New York.

Now, in the terminal building, remembering how worried her mother had been about her just being in a girls' camp, Kathy felt a little guilty about coming all the way out West. She loved her mother, she didn't want to worry her, but at the same time she knew she had to break away sometime; she couldn't be Mama's little baby forever. She had never told her mother about her plan to join the Army Nurse Corps when she became old enough; she hadn't dared. That was one

reason she had taken the job at Gunshot so gratefully. It was just for a few months and would serve to wean her gradually away from her mother's overprotection.

"Well, are you or aren't you?" A man's voice penetrated Kathy's thoughts.

Kathy looked up, guiltily realizing that the man had been talking to her, but his words hadn't registered.

"Am I or am I not what?"

The man frowned and shook his head. "It's who, not what, and for my sake and for the sake of my guests, I hope you're not," he said. "I thought all nurses were alert and on the ball. If this is an example—" He let his voice trail off as he unabashedly studied her features, her flawless complexion which now matched her flaming red hair.

Kathy mentally cursed the heat she felt flaming her face. She hated the way she blushed everytime she was uncomfortable, felt it betrayed the professional calm every nurse should have. So this was Don Lightfoot, her prospective employer. Well, she couldn't say she was any more impressed with him that he apparently was with her.

"Please say you're not Katherine Frame," the man said in a pleading voice that held a note of mockery. "Right now I've got two guests laid up with sprains and another coughing his fool head off. The only doctor in Gunshot is up in the mountains somewhere treating a hunter who sat on his gun, the darned fool. I mean the hunter, not the doc," he amended as Kathy's eyes widened.

"Look, I've got to have a nurse to take care of my guests," he continued, "but you're much too young and pretty to inspire confidence. What I really was looking for was some horse-faced character who had nothing on her mind but her work."

He scowled and Kathy wondered uncomfortably if he were serious. Then she giggled in spite of herself. "I'd like to oblige

you, Mr. Lightfoot, but I can't do a thing about it. My name is Katherine Frame; it says so right on my birth certificate, along with my date of birth. Of course, if I'm such a terrible disappointment to you, having a face like a woman rather than a horse, I can take the next plane out of here."

"You can but you won't," her employer replied. "My ancestors might have sold your ancestors Manhattan Island for twenty-four dollars but we Indians have wised up quite a bit since then. It cost me a hundred and seventy-five dollars to fly you out here and you're not flying back until my last guest has left."

Kathy shrugged. She dug into her purse for her luggage checks, then handed them to the young man. "In that case, you'd better get my luggage," she said, "and be careful, don't scratch the leather; it's a brand new set."

Don Lightfoot grinned. "Yes ma'am," he said mockingly, "I'll be happy to oblige. I'll be very careful, ma'am. Any further instructions, ma'am?"

Kathy smiled, felt another blush coming on. Somehow this young man had a way of making her feel very young and foolish, although he couldn't be more than a few years older than she was.

She watched as he walked towards the baggage section, mentally revising the picture she'd had of him ever since she'd seen his name on the letter. In spite of his name and his one-eighth Indian blood, he wasn't even dark. His hair was as blond as hers was red and his eyes were much too blue to be real. He had a rather square type face with big features, though, and high cheekbones. With imagination, Kathy felt she could see some of his Indian ancestry behind his extremely Nordic coloring. He was was tall and broad-shouldered, but lithe and slim-hipped; in fact, Kathy thought he walked somewhat like a panther, taking long flowing strides, his feet seeming to stalk the ground rather than step on it.

He walked like an overburdened panther coming back however, weighted down as he was by her three suitcases plus her traincase, which bobbed precariously underneath his arm. Kathy reached out and took it from him. It wasn't until she had her hand around the handle that she realized she was tingling all over from brushing his arm in the brief encounter.

"Goodness, girl," she thought to herself, "get hold of yourself. He's handsome and amusing but after all you've only just met the man."

Aloud she said, "That's an awful load for one man to carry, Mr. Lightfoot."

He grinned. "I'm a lot of man, Kathy. And say, would you mind dropping the Mister bit? If you don't call me Don, I'm liable not to answer and that would be a shame, wouldn't it?"

Kathy giggled. "I'm afraid I can't quite think of you as Mister at all, Don, so you needn't worry."

"I just this minute stopped worrying," the young man replied. "Now let's decide where we go for dinner and dancing. Not that there are too many places to choose from." He grinned. "Two, to be exact. Steak or Mexican food. Both places have terrific orchestras. Which would you prefer?"

"Oh, Mexican, by all means," Kathy answered quickly.

But as she walked beside him towards the big doors leading to the outdoors, she suddenly felt a pang of guilt.

"Don't you think we should go right to the lodge, Don?" she asked. "You have those guests who need nursing care."

"They're under control," Don replied. "Doc Carter saw them this morning and they're doing fine. Of course, when they see what a pretty nurse I've brought, they'll probably all have relapses just to enjoy the sight of you. Either that or they'll bounce out of bed and invite you to go walking in the

moonlight. Either way they can wait until tomorrow. Tonight belongs to me."

Kathy smiled in relief. She didn't particularly want to go to the lodge right now; the prospect of dinner and dancing with her handsome employer was much too enticing. And two sprains and a cough didn't sound too serious. It was probably as Don had said; the sight of a nurse in a crisp white uniform would either get them on their feet in a hurry or else make them want to enjoy their illnesses a little longer.

Don felt unaccountably happy as he led the pretty nurse towards his car. It was true, as he had told her, that he'd expected an older woman and certainly not such an attractive one. And he had no intentions of falling in love with her—or any girl—at this particular time.

But, under the spell of the moment, he shut his mind to his plans for his immediate future, plans which definitely did not include entanglement with a female, however attractive she might be.

Aloud he said, "I'm glad you chose 'La Tapatia', Kathy. After my cook, Conchita, they serve the best Mexican food I've tasted outside of old Mexico. And just wait until you hear their orchestra. You'll think you're in Spain."

Driving from the airport towards the lights of the town called Mesa City, Kathy felt relaxed and happy. Certainly all her fears, and her mother's fears, were unfounded. Everything was so lovely and peaceful, she just knew she would be tremendously happy here. She even felt a little disappointed that she would find no adventure here after all.

La Tapatia was as Don had told her it would be—quaint and charming and just loaded with atmosphere. Dinner was served out of big wooden bowls onto Mexican pottery-type dishes—an assortment of exotic foods that tasted as good as they looked and smelled. Kathy enjoyed every moment of the meal, and afterwards she felt herself melt into Don's arms as

they danced to the romantic music of the Spanish string orchestra. She thought perhaps it was the relief from the tension she had felt coming out here; certainly she had never felt this way before, all soft and warm inside, totally immersed in the joy of the moment, not knowing or caring when the feeling began, wanting only for it to go on forever.

"Nice, isn't it, Kathy?" Don murmured, his lips brushing her hair, his arms tightening about her as they danced.

"It's just lovely," Kathy murmured in reply. "I could go on dancing forever."

Don loosed his hold on Kathy a trifle uncomfortably.

"I'd like to too but we've got a long ride ahead of us."

Kathy seemed not to have heard Don's words at all. She continued to drift dreamily in his arms. Although he kept trying to remind himself this was not what he wanted, Don felt himself pulled along with the spell of the moment until finally the orchestra was playing the Spanish version of "Auld Lang Syne" and the musicians started noisily putting up their instruments.

Kathy was still swaying in time to the non-existent music when Don murmured into her ear, "Time to wake up and go home, Kathy. They're getting ready to roll up the dance floor."

Kathy felt as if she'd come back to earth with a bang as they walked back towards their table and Don picked up her coat and held it up for her to slip into.

"Is it very far to Gunshot?" she asked.

"Sixty miles," Don replied.

Sixty miles sounded long to Kathy but she didn't flinch until he added casually, "It's mostly straight up. Gunshot's twelve thousand feet altitude, you know."

"Straight up?" Kathy echoed in a small voice. "Why, I thought we were on top of a mountain here."

They were outside the restaurant now, walking towards

the car. Looking about her, Kathy thought wonderingly that it was like standing on top of the world. When she mentioned this to Don, he chuckled and replied, "I feel like I'm on top of the world right now too, Kathy, but mainly because I'm with you. Mesa City is on top of a mountain all right, but it's a small one, only four thousand feet high—a peanut compared to Gunshot. You've got a real thrill ahead of you, Kathy. When you climb eight thousand feet in sixty miles, you'll know you've really been traveling. But don't let it scare you," he added quickly, seeing the sudden fright in her eyes. "Just relax and let this country grow on you. It's probably like nothing you've ever known before but I'm sure you'll learn to love it in time."

Thinking back to the joy of the past few hours, Kathy was able to reply quite sincerely, "I'm sure you're right, Don." Then she sighed. "Tonight's been fun, hasn't it?"

Don pressed her hand gently. "It certainly has, Kathy, and we'll have lots more as time goes on. Gosh, I'm glad you didn't turn out to be a super-efficient nurse-type after all."

Kathy felt herself stiffen. "You may not believe it, Don," she said, "but even though I was the youngest girl in my class at York Memorial, I graduated cum laude. And I'm a very efficient nurse." She moved slightly away from him then and looked at the scenery skimming by her.

"Oh, I'm sure you're very efficient, Kathy," Don said smoothly, "but I'm glad you're so pretty at the same time. It'll be fun having you around."

He stopped speaking abruptly as the road narrowed and started winding in corkscrew curves and they began to climb sharply.

Kathy had meant to ask him to call her "Miss Frame" once they reached the hotel (nurses were always called "Miss") but her attention was riveted to the road now, particularly the drop into nothingness on the side away from the rock.

"You ought to go a little slower, Don, and keep your eyes on the road," she said in a small voice. "This road seems awfully dangerous."

Don immediately eased his foot up on the accelerator, and slowed the big car down. "I guess it is a little frightening to an easterner at first," he said in a softly understanding tone of voice. "Of course, I've been tearing over these hills all my life. I never even think I'm going fast."

He reached over and patted Kathy's hands, tightly clenched in her lap. "Relax, Kathy, there's nothing to be afraid of. I'll guard you like a mama bear guards her cubs, and one of these days you'll be riding along without even realizing you're on a mountain road, you'll be so used to it."

Kathy forced her hands apart, forced herself to lean back against the car seat and try to relax. She was grateful to Don for slowing down immediately and for not teasing her about her fear. She hoped someday she would be able to be as nonchalant at riding on these mountain roads as Don was, able to relax and enjoy the beauty surrounding her.

But she had to admit that right now she wished she were back home in her mother's apartment on Riverside Drive, standing by the window, watching the boats go up and down the river.

As sharply as the car had been climbing, now it suddenly started to descend. Kathy felt a quick gasp in her throat, knew it had been audible as Don immediately murmured, "Don't be afraid, Kathy," and started slowing the car down to a crawl.

Feeling a trifle silly now, Kathy replied, "I'm all right, Don, honestly I am. You just go ahead and drive the way you always do. We'll never get to the lodge at this rate."

Later in the evening, while she was standing knee-deep in the snow, wondering if she would live long enough to see Lightfoot Lodge at all, Kathy's words came back to her as a

sort of prophesy, but right now they made her feel very brave.

Gradually, Don put on a little more speed until the big car was skimming along. Towards her left now, Kathy could see the lights of a town far below.

"It looks like it's straight down, Don," she remarked, thinking but not adding that it would be awfully scary driving straight down.

"Oh, it's almost straight down but not quite," Don replied cheerily. "First we wind up around the canyon road, then we wind down Snake Road. It's too bad it's night and too dark to see anything. This is beautiful country, Kathy."

He went on to describe the craglike rocks that dotted a huge gorge below them, shaped by generations of exposure to water and air into odd statue-like shapes. As he talked, Kathy could visualize the scene and looked forward to coming back in daylight.

"We'll come back after the worst of the snow is over though," Don remarked, and again Kathy felt herself plunged into an abyss of fear.

"You mean this is a bad time of year to drive here, Don?" her voice sounded thin in her ears.

"The worst," he replied, "but don't let it worry you. I have snow tires on my car. Besides, the snowplow keeps this road open all year round."

"Snowplow?" Kathy was intrigued. "Where it is? And what is it? Will we get to see it?"

Don laughed. "One question at a time, please, Kathy. There are a lot of snowplows. They're tractors with big scoops on front. They scoop up the snow and toss it to the side of the road. We won't get to see one unless it starts to snow, so I hope we don't get to see it tonight. We shouldn't. This road was plowed out a couple of days ago and it hasn't snowed up here since. I'd like to make Gunshot before it

starts again, or at least Small Mesa." He pointed to the town below, which seemed even further away now than it had been before.

When Kathy mentioned this to Don, he laughed and replied, "That's because we climb more than we descend, but once we get on Snake Road, we'll be almost there. Then the lights will seem close enough to reach out and grab."

But before they went more than a few miles more, it started to snow, a blanket of white seeming to come out of nowhere with the suddenness of a curtain being lowered. Don immediately started the windshield wipers. Kathy watched in fascination as the big soft squishy drifts of snow quickly formed in the triangle of the blade as it moved slowly and tiredly back and forth. She sensed, rather than heard, Don mutter unhappily under his breath and instantly she moved closer to him, feeling the warmth of his body bringing a kind of calm to her own. She had felt a sudden panic at his obvious unease; it was so big and so lonesome and so overpowering out here, it made her feel small and unimportant, as if this big and empty land could swallow her up without leaving a trace. She moved still closer to Don, remembering they hadn't seen another car since they had left the airport road, hadn't seen a single light except for the reflectors at the side of the road, and even those were now just small, vaguely pink dots.

Don had, of necessity, slowed the car to a crawl, and was now peering intently ahead. He was conscious of Kathy's fear, but he didn't dare take a hand from the wheel to hug her, as he would have liked to do. Instead he spoke in what he hoped was a reassuringly normal tone of voice.

"The snowplow should be along any minute now, Kathy. Keep watching for the blue lights, that'll be it."

"How will they know to come out?" Kathy said in a wondering tone of voice.

"Oh, those boys have a sixth sense about this sort of thing," Don replied. "And there are radar towers all over here giving out signals. It'll come, don't worry. Besides, we'll be on the downgrade any minute now, and in no time, we'll be at the lodge, ready to watch the sunrise. Kathy, you just haven't lived until you've seen the sun come up over a snow-covered mountain top."

If he hoped to interest Kathy in cheery things like sunrises right now, which he definitely did, Don might as well have saved his breath.

"I don't see any blue lights," Kathy said, "and I'm looking as hard as I can."

She paused, cocked her head as if listening for something, then said wonderingly, "Don, why is the car shaking so, and it feels like it's sliding. There's nothing wrong, is there?"

"Not a thing," Don grunted, as he tried to keep the now badly-skidding car under control. He shouldn't be skidding, he had brand-new snow tires and the road had been plowed out and sanded not too long ago, but the snow that was falling was so very soft, the sand so unevenly applied and the air so cold, that the road was a sea of ice. Don kept heading into the skids, then steering back onto the road, fighting to keep from hitting the brakes, knowing if he did, he might land either in the ditch on one side or over the side of the mountain on the other. Suddenly seeing a wide spot in the road, he steered into it, hoping to right the car and possibly turn around. He didn't tell Kathy, but the chances of the snowplow coming along before morning were about one in a thousand, and the way the snow was coming down, he didn't dare tackle Snake Hill.

"What are you doing, Don?" Kathy's voice came out in a squeak. "Oh, look out, Don—there's a big glob of snow coming down!"

Only it wasn't snow, it was a snow-covered boulder, and

Don braked to a sudden stop just before hitting it, braked so hard he felt the car shudder and the motor die. Cursing softly, he tried to start again but all he could hear was the whine of the battery. Closing his ears to the troubled sounds coming from the red-headed nurse, Don kept trying to start the car, but the motor wouldn't catch. Finally he turned to face her.

"Kathy, I'd better tell you the truth," he said. "We're in trouble. Don't worry, we'll come out of it, but we might have to spend the night here."

"Oh no," Kathy wailed, visions of horrible things–the least of them freezing to death–parading before her eyes. "Oh no, Don, surely the snowplow will come–or someone."

"Well, it might," Don said, wishing grimly he could have even that small glimmer of faith to hang onto. If he had been by himself, he would have just curled up on the back seat and gone to sleep, but with Kathy along, that was another story. As he started trying to reassure her, Kathy squealed suddenly, "Oh, Don, look, there's a blue light coming. It must be the snowplow–aren't we lucky?"

Don followed Kathy's pointing finger with incredulous eyes. Sure enough, it was the twin blue lights of the snowplow, coming right towards them, tossing the newly-fallen snow aside like a veil. Quickly getting his flashlight from the glove compartment, Don flung open the door of the car and dashed into the road. He turned on the red flasher and started it blinking. If the men on the plow didn't see him, his car could easily get another blanket of snow on top of the one it had collected in the ten or fifteen minutes he'd been stuck in the drift.

"Hey, you there, what are you doing?" The plow came to a shuddering halt and one of the men on it hailed Don. "Don't you know this road's closed? Been closed out of Mesa since this morning. We're just on our way home."

"I'm stuck," Don said. "Besides, there's no closed sign up out of the highway. I'm on my way to Gunshot."

"You'll never make it tonight," the man said. "What's the matter with your car? You broke down?"

Now that Don knew he and Kathy would be all right, his normal good humor returned. "Naw, my filly and I are admiring the scenery," he replied with a grin.

The other man whistled a few bars of "I'm In The Mood For Love", then both men chuckled.

"Give us a lift to town?" Don asked. "My motor's conked out and I've got to get a wrecker out here before morning."

"Fat chance of that," the man replied. "Only lovers and idiots are on the road tonight. But you're welcome to a lift. This crate don't ride so extra-soft but you know what us Indians say, 'Work-up butt, save-um feet.' "

All of the men laughed and Kathy wondered if everyone out here had Indian ancestors or if this was a stock western joke.

Don turned to Kathy. "Ever ride on a snowplow, Kathy?" he asked gently. "If not, it's an experience no red-blooded American girl should miss. And if you want to massage a few inches off your hips, this will do it."

Some two hours later, two grinding hours of plowing slowly through drifts, squeezed four in a seat meant for two, with the icy air making her hair stiff even through her hat, and the snow stinging her face, Kathy climbed stiffly down from the snowplow.

"Thanks, fellows," Don called to the men on the plow, then said to Kathy, "Now we go look for a telephone. I hope you don't mind walking; just pretend you're a squaw out walking with her brave in the moonlight."

Too numb to protest or even to comment on the plight they were in, Kathy started walking alongside of Don. This was the longest night in her life, she thought, longer than the

longest twelve-to-eight shift she had ever put in at York Memorial Hospital. Finally they reached a service station.

"I'm going to phone for a car, Kathy," Don said, "then we'll take the long way round. We'll make Gunshot by morning."

"How about your own car?" Kathy asked. "will you send a wrecker for it?"

Don smiled. "No wrecker's going up that road tonight, Kathy. I'll just leave word at the garage to pick up my car as soon as the road is clear, and then to notify me. It could be a week before they bring it down and I can't wait around here." He laughed. "Last year I once had to leave my car up in the mountains with a broken axle. By the time the wrecker got there, it was snowed in solid. It was almost two months before I saw it again."

Kathy felt as if she'd landed in another world as she watched Don stroll unconcernedly towards the phone. Nothing seemed to faze him, she reflected. He abandoned one car, casually ordered another, not knowing how soon he'd see his own again. Was this how people lived here, accepting the rigors of the mountains and the heavy snows as if they were merely minor inconveniences? Kathy shrugged. Apparently it was and if she wanted to fit in, she would have to act the same way. She made up her mind she would go along with the tide, taking all her cues from her handsome employer.

And she'd pretend not to notice when he called her a filly or a squaw. *Just as long as he doesn't call me a sow,* she told herself. *If he does that, I'll squeal!*

II

THE TRIP in the car the garage sent over (Don told her his insurance covered this sort of emergency) was a pleasant, if roundabout one, on a good highway that went around the highest mountains rather than over them. Kathy and Don drove all night but Kathy wasn't frightened now, she even managed to grab a cat nap on the way.

The sun was just breaking over the mountains as they came in view of the town of Gunshot and Kathy caught her breath in sheer delight. It looked like a picture postcard, she told herself. A steep main street lined with log houses and shops, all feathered with snow, and at the very top of the street, the lodge itself, which was made of logs and had a steep green gabled roof. The mountain peaks shimmering in the background were breathtaking; sharply pointed white peaks with the pastel blue of the sky peeking between the mountains and the dusty-looking snow clouds.

"It's beautiful, Don," she breathed.

Don patted her hand. "I knew you'd like it, Kathy," he said. "Everytime I go away and come back, I get the same thrill as I did the first time I ever set eyes on it."

Kathy went through the balance of the day as if in a dream. First, a wonderful combination breakfast-lunch served by a colorful Mexican woman in front of a roaring fire; then a nap in the bedroom Don had had prepared especially for her. Then she went exploring with Don. There was a holiday air all throughout the town. Everywhere they went, they met friends of Don, all of whom immediately became Kathy's friends. Not that they said so; Kathy just knew it.

It seemed minutes after they started out that the sun

started dipping down behind the mountain peaks and they were headed back towards the lodge. And suddenly guilt stabbed at Kathy. She'd been here one whole day; she was a nurse and she had three patients at the lodge and she hadn't even seen them! When she mentioned this to Don, he smiled gently and told her she was pretty even when she frowned, as she was doing now.

"You're a nut," Kathy said, but she realized the word had a loving sound on her lips. Could she be falling in love with her new employer so quickly, she wondered. She still didn't think she quite approved of him and the casual way he moved through life. Still she felt happier with him than she ever had before with any man or in any place, including her beloved York Memorial Hospital. She'd asked for adventure and he had given it to her. She hoped it was only appreciation she felt. Love was definitely not in her plan for her immediate future.

When they got back to the lodge, the Mexican maid, Conchita, served them their dinner on a low wooden table in front of the roaring fire in the main room of the lodge. Before they were halfway finished, guests started drifting in from the ski area, in groups of twos and threes. They were a happy and carefree lot, stamping their boots on the stone floor, comparing notes on the type of day they'd had, noisily making plans for the evening.

Kathy looked enviously at the women in their dashing and flattering ski outfits; the sleekly tailored pants, the adventurous-looking boots, the beautifully embroidered sweaters and the face-framing parkas.

"I wish I could ski," she said hungrily to Don, "but I don't have an outfit."

"It takes more than a pair of tight pants and a couple of skis to make a skier, Kathy," Don replied.

Kathy sighed. "I still feel left out of everything," she said.

"You needn't," Don said. "Tell you what, I'll take you toboganning tomorrow. How would you like that?"

Kathy grinned. "As my Indian forebears would say, 'Save-um feet.' "

Don burst into delighted laughter. "You certainly catch on quick, Kathy. I'll make a westerner of you yet."

Suddenly the door opened with a bang and two men burst in. They were covered with snow and had their skis and ski poles slung over their shoulders. They made straight for Kathy and Don.

"Don, there's trouble," one of the men said in a panic-filled voice. "Barry King took a bad spill. The patrol's bringing him in now. Do you know where the doc is? we'll need him."

And now Kathy saw a new Don. Everything about him seemed to change in a split second as he turned to her and said, "Go get into your uniform, Kathy. I'll go round up Dr. Carter. Then I'll go out and meet the ski patrol, help them bring Barry in. Hurry, now," he gave her a little push as she stood there uncertainly.

Kathy rushed to her room, started to unpack the bag that held her uniform and her nurse's kit. It had been so sudden this transition from playgirl to nurse, she was finding it difficult to get used to the idea.

"I shouldn't have let Don make me forget what I came here for," Kathy told herself sharply. "I'm going to look like a shirker if the doctor asks me about the other patients and I have to tell him I haven't even seen them."

As soon as she had donned her uniform and was hurrying down the stone staircase, Kathy felt like a different person. It had always been like that with her, she reflected, from the very first time she'd put on her probationary nurse's uniform; it was as if another part of her appeared, a part

that wanted to forget she was a woman and only wanted to be a nurse.

When she reached the main room of the lodge, she immediately spotted Dr. Carter. Not that he looked any different from Don or any of the other men at the lodge—not outwardly anyway. Of medium height and squarely built, quite young-looking, he wore the same thick square-toed boots with his ski-pants tucked into the tops, the same loud shirt and sheepskin-lined jacket, his fur-trimmed parka flung back from his crew-cut brown hair. He was standing in front of the fire, impatiently knocking the snow from his boots, and his doctor's bag was casually tossed on a couch; it could have belonged to anyone, but there was such strength and purpose about this square-set young man, Kathy knew he had to be Dr. Carter. She walked towards him.

"I'm Nurse Frame," she said. "You must be Dr. Carter."

He gave her a frosty look. "Where were you all day? I was looking for you. I stopped in to see my patients and Conchita wasn't even sure who you were. She only knew Don drove to the airport to bring back a nurse, then showed up with a girl, and the two of you have been partying around ever since. Why weren't you taking care of your patients? What do you think you're here for?"

Kathy felt the blood rush to her face as a tremendous surge of guilt came over her. She didn't attempt to answer other than to murmur "Sorry, Doctor." What was there to say? Even though Don was her employer and even though he had assured her that her patients didn't need her, she had acted in a most unprofessional manner. And while Dr. Carter did no more than look accusingly at her, she knew that as far as he was concerned, she might just as well take the the next plane back to New York City for all he would care. In fact, from the set of his face and the anger in his fine dark eyes, he might like it.

He kept muttering to himself as he stamped impatiently in front of the fire, and by straining her ears and using her imagination to fill in the blanks, Kathy was able to realize that there was someplace else he felt he should be, someone who needed him desperately.

"Is there anything I can do to help, Doctor?" she asked timidly now, hoping he wouldn't launch into another tirade against her and her behavior.

He turned to her and frowned. "I have a woman in labor up on the mesa in a farmhouse. A mesa is a flat place on top of a mountain, in case you didn't know," he said. "I should be there now. Instead I have to wait here for some fool skier who probably has no worse than a broken toe." He hammered his fist into his hand. "By God, if that guy hasn't at least a broken leg, I'll break a few of his bones myself! Making me stay here and wait for him when I've got a woman about to give birth anytime now."

"How close are her pains, Doctor?" Kathy asked, grateful to be on a professional footing now.

"Not too close or I wouldn't be here. In fact, I suspect it's false labor," Dr. Carter admitted scowlingly. "Still I don't like leaving her alone. She lives on the other side of the pass. I can get through on skis now; later could be a sonofagun. You never know what's liable to happen in this country. And even though there's not much I can do for her pain, I'd like to at least be with her."

Suddenly there was a commotion as the big outer door opened. Kathy hoped it was the ski patrol with the hapless skier. She hoped too that he was not too seriously hurt (in spite of what Dr. Carter had said) so that Dr. Carter could go to the woman in labor, but her hopes were dashed to the ground as soon as Don strode into the room alone. One look at his face confirmed her worst fears even before he spoke.

"It'll be another thirty minutes before they get here, Doc,"

Don addressed himself to the doctor, ignoring Kathy as if she weren't even there. "They've got to take it slow. The boy is badly hurt; they're afraid it may be a spinal injury."

Dr. Carter drew his breath in sharply. "That sounds bad," he said softly. "I hope they're wrong. But what am I going to do about Mrs. Alcott? She's having labor pains. It could be false labor but what if it isn't? How can I be in two places at once?"

He seemed to be talking to himself.

"What about me? Why can't I go to her?" Kathy interjected.

"Yes, why can't she? I can take her," Don said.

Dr. Carter looked at Kathy as if just now seeing her for the first time. "Do you ski?" he asked.

Kathy shook her head.

Dr. Carter looked unhappy. He turned to Don. "I don't see how you'd make it," he said. "It's way over a mile, nearer two, and the road's under six feet of snow, packed solid. The only way in is by ski."

"We could go on snowshoes," Don said, and his expression was as unhappy as the doctor's. "I know it's slow going that way, and tough, but what if the baby comes before you can get there?"

Dr. Carter nodded his head, his eyes bleak. "I guess that's it then," he said. "You two had better get started. It's going to be rough on Miss Frame until she gets the hang of walking on snowshoes and it'll probably take you twice as long as it should. I'll join you as soon as I'm able."

Between Conchita and several women-skiers, Kathy was able to assemble a warm outfit to wear and in record time joined Don outside where she awkwardly stood first on one foot, then another, while he fastened snowshoes to her feet.

"It won't be too bad going, Kathy," Don assured her gently. "It's below freezing now so the snow will be hard-packed,

and it's downhill a good part of the way. If you could ski, we could make it in fifteen or twenty minutes."

"And this way, how long will it take us?"

Don shrugged. "Couple of hours maybe."

Kathy gasped. "And that poor woman in labor! What if the baby starts to come?"

"It won't," Don said grimly. "Doc Carter's an ace of a guy, but sometimes he's an old lady. Believe me, if he thought Mrs. Alcott were that close to giving birth, he'd never have left her. We'll be there in plenty of time. Don't worry."

Kathy looked at the snowshoes Don had strapped to her feet and wondered how she would ever be able to walk in them. She found out it would be a lot harder than it looked the first step she took—when she landed flat on her face in the snow. Don lifted her gently to her feet, helped her brush the snow from her clothing.

"Now let's not get rambunctious," he said. "You have to learn to walk on these things; you don't just take off and fly like a bird."

He showed her how to hold her body and place her feet and pretty soon Kathy was able to make progress. Slow, to be sure, but progress nonetheless.

It was close to three hours before they came in sight of the snow-drifted farmhouse, three grueling hours during which Kathy ached in muscles she didn't even know she possessed. As tired and sore as she was, Kathy couldn't suppress a thrill of delight at first sight of the house. It looked like a miniature chalet with a gabled roof and stone chimney above the polished logs, and a red lamp hung above the doorway gave the hanging icicles a soft pink glow.

And then they were inside the house, greeting the worried-looking young man who introduced himself as Mel Alcott, and Kathy was shrugging off her outer clothing as she walked,

trying not to run, into the bedroom Mr. Alcott had pointed out to her.

"Wait and have a hot drink first, Nurse," Mel Alcott's voice came after her. "Freda's pains stopped. She was sleeping just a minute ago."

But Kathy kept on going. She was a nurse with a patient who might need her at this very moment. After she checked and made sure her patient was all right there would be plenty of time for her to down the hot drink her chilled body was crying out for.

Mrs. Alcott wasn't asleep. Kathy knew as soon as she looked at her that she was just feigning sleep, but she seemed free of pain. She was a small, dark-haired girl, making a little mound on the big old-fashioned bed, her swollen body outlined by the flickering fire in the big stone fireplace.

Kathy walked over to the bed and said gently, "You can open your eyes now. I'm a nurse. I've come to help you."

Her patient quickly "awoke".

"You don't know how glad I am to see you," she told Kathy fervently. "I'm still having pains but they're not too bad. I just pretended to be asleep so Mel would go away for a little and let me be." She forced a grin to her white, tired face. "Honestly, the way he's carrying on, you'd think I'm the only woman in the world who ever expected a baby."

Kathy smoothed the woman's hair back from her forehead with a practiced hand.

"Not the only woman certainly," she agreed, "but wouldn't you be better off in a hospital?"

Mentally she pictured the sterile and beautifully equipped O. B. department at York Memorial. The labor and delivery rooms, the laboratory that could deliver a blood or urine analysis at a moment's notice. She thought of the wise, kind-eyed doctors garbed in sterile caps and gowns attending the

delivery table, with autoclaved instruments at the ready in case of a difficult birth.

"I was planning to go to the hospital," Mrs. Alcott replied, "but I guess I put it off too long. Either that or Dr. Carter miscalculated."

Mentally Kathy thought that was hardly likely. Dr. Carter looked like the kind of man who could determine a baby's time of arrival to the second. And, Kathy added wryly to herself, woe betide the baby who didn't come when Dr. Carter said it was due. He looked like the kind of man who would brook no impertinence from even a tiny baby. He'd probably slug it when it was born, rather than just slap it gently!

Aloud she said comfortingly, "You never can tell with a first baby, you know," thinking to herself of the tired joke that continually made the rounds of O. B. departments in hospitals everywhere. "A first baby can come in anywhere from three to nine months; the second takes at least nine." Then, because she really didn't know whether or not this was Mrs. Alcott's first baby, she had just assumed it was because Mrs. Alcott looked so young, she added, "Nor any other for that matter. Why, do you know, there are cases on record of women carrying babies twelve months? They're rare, of course, but it's happened." She grinned. "It could even happen to you. How would you like that?"

Mrs. Alcott forced a grin. "The way I feel now, I think I'd be glad to go another three months, Nurse. At least then it would be spring and there'd be no question of my getting to the hospital in time."

"Don't worry about a thing, Mrs. Alcott," Kathy assured the woman now. "If necessary, I can deliver a baby, although I'm sure we'll get you to the hospital in plenty of time. Dr. Carter said he's sure you've had only false labor pains and I have an idea he's right. Tell you what, I'll go get a hot drink and

you keep timing the pains, then I'll come back and give you a quick examination. I could do it now but since the pains are not so bad, I'd rather wait and see if they stop completely."

Truthfully, Kathy felt cowardly about making the examination. Not that she hadn't done it many times before, but then there had always been a doctor within calling distance. Now, completely on her own, she felt hesitant. Of course, she would be very gentle and it was unlikely that anything she would do would bring about a precipitate birth; still Kathy knew she would feel happier if Mrs. Alcott's pains abated. If they were indeed false labor pains, perhaps brought on by her fear of giving birth at home rather than in a hospital, possibly just the sight of a nurse in a crisp white uniform would make them abate. Kathy felt it was worth a try.

"You don't mind if I go outside and let your husband give me a hot drink, do you?" she asked her patient gently. "If you'd feel better if I stayed, I can ask him to bring it in. Just say whatever is on your mind."

Mrs. Alcott smiled and this time her smile touched her eyes as well as her rather immature mouth. "I feel better just seeing you, Miss Frame," she replied. "You go on outside and have your drink and I'll try to rest."

"Make it Kathy and I'll call you Freda," Kathy said. "I'll change into my uniform while I'm about it, too. I'd feel better handling you in my uniform."

What Kathy didn't add, indeed hardly realized herself, was that she was so proud of her uniform she hated to take it off, even to sleep. In fact, there were older nurses in the nurses' home at York Memorial who were willing to swear she slept in her uniform, cap and all!

Outside, with the men, Kathy relaxed gratefully, swallowing the hot toddy Mr. Alcott had waiting for her. She listened to the two men talk, noting how Mr. Alcott seemed a changed person since she'd shown up. Although she could have re-

sented the casual banter between him and Don, she didn't. She felt too warm and rewarded that her mere presence did that to him. This, she decided, was one of those moments that makes a nurse proud of her chosen profession; to come into a room where the tension is thick enough to cut with a knife, where a person's worry is a poisonous thing in the air, to see worry and tension dispelled as if by magic by just one's presence.

Kathy was almost sorry when her drink was gone.

"Guess I'll go wash up and change into my uniform, if you'll show me where," she said to Mr. Alcott.

Immediately his face resumed lines of worry. "There's nothing wrong with my wife, is there?" he asked anxiously. "I thought when you came out and sat with us, that meant she was all right."

"That's exactly what it did mean," Kathy said, suppressing a smile of amusement. "My goodness, all I'm doing is getting ready to look like a nurse. You know, Dr. Carter will be along anytime now, and he expects to find a nurse waiting for him, not a ragamuffin dressed in scrounged pieces of clothing."

Don spoke now to Kathy for the first time since they'd entered the Alcott home. "You look lovely, Kathy, but then you always do. I don't know when you look loveliest, as a matter of fact—whether it's when you're scared to death, or as happy as a child, or with the wind and the snow in your face—"

"Or falling on my fanny in the snow," Kathy finished laughingly.

She stood up. Both men immediately got to their feet.

"Oh, don't bother to get up," Kathy said, "just show me where to change."

Mr. Alcott pointed to a door down the hallway. Picking up the bag containing her uniform and shoes, waving away Don's offer of help, Kathy walked swiftly, with her nurse's professional stride, in the direction her patient's husband had

indicated. She found herself in a large and sparklingly modern bathroom, where she took a hot shower, then changed into her uniform. Then, after combing her hair and powdering her face (just enough to take the shine from it, but not enough to appear cosmetic), she lifted her bag and made her way back to the living room where the men still sat.

As one, they arose again, and Mr. Alcott extended another hot toddy towards her. She took it gratefully, saying, "Rather than drink and run, I think I'll take this inside with me. I want to see how Mrs. Alcott is getting along."

When Kathy returned to her patient, she felt a flicker of apprehension. In the split second before Freda Alcott had spotted her, she had had a look of panic in her eyes, a look she quickly and bravely erased at first sight of the nurse. There had been a slight movement of her head too; now Kathy looked in the direction in which her patient had been looking, towards the window. The drapes didn't quite meet in the center; through the two or three inch slit, Kathy saw the thick blanket of white, and knew that snow was falling.

"Looks like we're going to have a little of the white stuff, doesn't it, Freda?" she said cheerfully.

Freda's eyes darkened but her voice matched Kathy's for cheerfulness when she answered, "Yes. It's pretty, isn't it?"

Pretty, yes, but it could be deadly, Kathy thought. Don had told her there was another road not too far from the Alcott home, a road that was kept open all winter except during the worst storms. This was the road they would use to take Mrs. Alcott to the hospital as soon as they could be reasonably certain she would not give birth on the way, provided it was open. But with the snow coming down as it was now, if it turned into a blizzard, there would be no chance to move Mrs. Alcott. Kathy wondered if it were this realization that was worrying her patient now, and she had a pretty good idea that it was. And, she had to admit, it was panicking her

too. She wished Dr. Carter would come. She'd been wishing all along that he would; in fact, that was the main reason she had put off her examination of her patient, hoping the doctor would come and relieve her of the responsibility.

Oh, I shouldn't be like this. A nurse should be brave and calm and resourceful, Kathy told herself. *How can I expect a patient to have confidence in me if I don't have confidence in myself?*

She forced a smile to her face as she faced Freda Alcott now, plumping up the already feather-light pillow, smoothing back the already-smooth hair, and was rewarded by seeing her patient visibly relax. Then Kathy drew up a comfortable-looking armchair next to the bed and picked up her drink. She felt as if she'd earned it. Freda Alcott picked up her own drink, which her husband brought her previously, and gravely extended it towards Kathy. Smilingly, the two young women clinked glasses.

"To little Freda or little Mel," Kathy said.

"Little Mel," Freda said quickly, then laughed and added, "No, I take that back. I don't care whether it's a boy or a girl, just as long as it's a strong healthy baby—and a patient one."

"Patient?" Kathy asked.

Freda dug up a smile. "Patient—in no hurry to be born." Her eyes traveled towards the window. "If it just holds off until I can get to the hospital, I'll feel a lot better."

"You really don't have a thing to worry about," Kathy replied cheerily. "Why, even if your baby comes within the next ten minutes, which is about as likely as its being born with a polka-dotted diaper wrapped around it and a bottle in each fist, I could deliver it myself."

To herself, Kathy added a fervent "God forbid", but she was happy to see a smile light up her patient's face.

"Oh, I'd trust you, Kathy," Freda said, "but—well, this being my first, I'm a little afraid." Her voice dropped to a

whisper. "In fact, I'm scared silly but I don't dare let Mel know what an awful coward I am."

Thinking about her own reluctance to even examine her patient, Kathy was able to say sincerely, "No more so than I, Freda. As a matter of fact, I don't mind telling you that just last night, driving up into these mountains with Don Lightfoot, I was so scared I'd have sold my soul to the devil to be on a plane headed back East."

At that moment, Freda winced, and Kathy knew her pains were starting again.

"It—it wasn't a bad one, Kathy," Freda said hopefully.

Kathy patted her hand gently, her eyes on her watch. In that split second, everything changed. The very air took on an electric quality as if the walls knew something was happening, as if they too were waiting, waiting with Freda and with Kathy to see if each woman, in her own way, were to be tested this night.

As apprehensive as Freda was, Kathy was twice as apprehensive. If Freda's womb contracted again and again regularly, it was very likely true labor. In that case, with the snow continuing to fall, she might very well have to deliver the baby. Of course, there was no reason why she couldn't. She had had a course in midwifery; she had all the necessary equipment in her nurse's kit. And there was no reason to suspect it would be other than a normal birth. Of course she could do it.

Finishing the last of her drink, Kathy knew she would have to stop stalling and find out what she could about her patient's condition.

"I think maybe I'd better have a look at you now, mama-to-be," she said lightly. "When Dr. Carter comes, first thing he'll ask is what I know and all I know so far is you're what the O. B. nurses at the hospital used to call P. P.—positively pregnant."

Freda winced and held up her hand for Kathy to wait a moment while a pain came and went, then Kathy proceeded with the examination. She was happy to see that dilation hadn't begun, nor was there any sign of the bag of water breaking.

Raising her head, Kathy said, "I'm sure they're false labor pains, Freda. Your water hasn't broken, not even a trickle coming through. True labor practically never starts until after the bag of waters breaks, usually several hours after, so you don't have a thing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about, that could very easily be a lie and Kathy knew it but there was no point in worrying Freda needlessly. False labor pains were one thing, but what if there was really something wrong? Pain was a symptom of many things, things with horrendous names like edema, toxemia, even the dreaded eclampsia. Suppose it was a complication of childbirth causing the pain?

Kathy watched her patient closely, noticing gratefully that the woman's pains came and went regularly. They had to be false labor pains, they just had to!

"You don't feel any different from usual, do you, Freda? I mean, not too hot or cold or anything like that?" Kathy said, more to make conversation than anything else.

"I—l, well, I do feel kind of funny, Kathy. The baby keeps moving around so and sometimes I think it's not alive anymore. Do you think maybe it's turning around?"

"Oh, no," Kathy answered quickly, knowing her wish was father to the thought prompting her reply. The baby shouldn't be turning now, but then Kathy comforted herself with the thought that Freda was over-apprenhensive and liable to imagine almost anything.

And she could well understand that. Goodness, hadn't she herself been a bundle of imagined fears and apprehensions almost since the moment she'd stepped off the plane at the

airfield? And even now wasn't she imagining the worst? The snow continuing to fall so that the road to the hospital would become impassable, Dr. Carter detained at the lodge with a critically injured skier, and she having to deliver a baby all by herself.

She turned to Freda, a quip on her lips, when suddenly Freda gasped. "Kathy, oh Kathy, something just happened! I'm all wet!" And she started to cry.

Kathy looked helplessly about her, then took a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

"That's the bag of waters breaking," she said. "Now you'll be going into true labor. Aren't you glad you're not having a twelve-month baby after all?"

III

ALL DURING the night, Freda's pains continued, sometimes closer together than at other times, sometimes weaker, sometimes stronger, but always constant.

"Bear down, oh bear down, honey," Kathy would whisper. "Don't fight the pain, it only makes it worse."

Talking that way, knowing there was nothing she could do to ease the other woman's pain, made Kathy feel like some sort of monster telling her to bear down rather than coast with the pains, but she knew it was for Freda's benefit. She was positive this was true labor and she told herself she was just as positive that Freda was going to have a normal birth.

"Kathy."

Kathy stiffened at Freda's voice. It sounded flat, almost toneless, not at all like that of a woman in labor.

Something was wrong!

"Kathy, the pain stopped. Is it supposed to?"

"You should be glad it stopped, honey," Kathy said gently. "Maybe you can grab a nap before it starts again."

"But is it normal, Kathy?" Freda persisted. "Maybe—maybe the baby is dead."

"Stop imagining things," Kathy said more sharply than she meant to. "I think I'd better have another look though, see exactly how you're coming along."

"Girls," Mel poked his head through the door at that moment, "can I come in? It's been hours since Don and I have heard a peep out of either one of you."

"You just picked the wrong time to come visiting," Kathy informed him. "Right now I'm getting ready to examine Freda so you'd better make yourself scarce. I'll call you when you can come back."

Gently she prepared her patient for an examination. First she checked for dilation, and was happy to see it progressing; slowly, to be sure, but then that was to be expected in a first birth. At least that confirmed that Freda was not in false labor. As she worked, Kathy felt all her fears leave her, the personal ones about her own competence, the ones about her patient. In fact, looking up momentarily, she was almost shocked to see the cozy room with its cheerfully papered walls and softly shaded lamps, rather than the austere labor room at the hospital. Apparently Freda sensed the change in Kathy for she relaxed visibly, saying, "Now if you could just ask the baby when he's going to come, we'd be all set."

Kathy started palpating Freda's abdomen before she replied. "I wouldn't be surprised if it is a he after all, Freda. The baby's kicking like a mule and he's in exactly the right position to come out squawling."

She sighed with relief as she straightened up, and started peeling off her rubber gloves.

"You're coming along beautifully, Freda. I think I'll let Mel come and visit you for a few minutes, then we'll see if you can get some rest before the pains start again."

She was rewarded by a grateful smile from her patient, then went and called Mel. He came into the room so quickly, Kathy knew he must have been hovering right outside the door. His eyes were red and swollen as if he'd been fighting sleep—and possibly tears. As soon as he looked at his wife, his whole face lit up.

"I'll go out for a few minutes and let you two visit alone," Kathy said. "Then you get yourself some sleep, Mel. I may need you later and I'll want you on your toes."

Fear jumped into Mel's eyes, dug lines into his boyish face. He started to speak but only a hoarse sound came out. He swallowed and cleared his throat, then managed to say, "You think the baby's coming, Nurse?"

Kathy started to laugh. At first she was relieved to have something to laugh about after all the tension, then her laugh turned a little hysterical. "I'm sorry," she said. "It just struck me funny. Goodness, what do you think has been happening the past eight or nine months? Of course the baby's coming!" She patted Mel's shoulder. "But not for a while, quite awhile if I'm any judge."

"Do you think the doc'll make it in time, then?" Mel asked quickly.

"I'm sure of it," Kathy replied firmly, wishing she were. Then, in order to avoid any further questions, she hurried into the big living room.

Don was sprawled out on the big overstuffed couch, but he wasn't asleep. His eyes were as red and swollen as Mel's. Looking at him, Kathy wondered if she too looked as worried and worn as the two men.

"No, don't get up, Don," she said quickly as Don started to rise. "I thought I'd sit and talk to you while Mel is inside with Freda."

Don smiled. "Okay, let's talk. I get to pick the subject because I'm bigger than you are." His smile turned into a broad grin. "And I pick you. Tell me, Kathy, do you believe in love at first sight?"

Kathy smiled in spite of herself, felt sudden warmth flood through her. She knew she should be thinking only of her patient now, but she found herself thinking of the man beside her, and when he reached for her hand and pressed it, she found herself answering its pressure.

"Tell me about the lodge, Don," she said, quickly withdrawing her hand, "today passed so quickly—or was it yesterday?—it seems like a dream, us wandering around the town. Then I had just begun seeing what the lodge itself was like when we had to leave. Does the lodge belong to you? And do you live there all year around? And will I get to learn to ski?"

"One question at a time, Kathy," Don said laughingly.

Then he told her, "Yes, the lodge belongs to me. It's a very old building. It's been in my family for many years. It's a shame I didn't get to show you the grounds; you didn't even get to see the natural hot springs. That was the original reason the lodge was built, you know. In fact, for many years, the springs were the only attraction here."

Don leaned his head back as he talked fondly of his childhood, when his father had enlarged the natural mineral hot springs and built the huge pool which drew people from thousands of miles away for its therapeutic effect. More recently, Don had built a bathhouse for people using the springs.

"I still own the land and the springs, Kathy," he went on, "but I lease the bathhouse and pool to someone else to run.

A Mr. Leggett—you'll meet him when we get back to the lodge. I stay here only for the skiing season, but Mr. Leggett keeps the springs and lodge open all year around. I'm going to take you swimming in the pool as soon as I can, Kathy. I think you'll enjoy it."

"Swimming in this weather?" Kathy jerked her head up. "Oh, it's indoors then, isn't it?"

Don smiled. "As a matter of fact, it's not. But the water ranges from ninety-eight to a hundred and thirty-five degrees in various sections of the pool and the steam rising from it heats the air around the pool. You go in and out through the bathhouse, so there's no chance to feel really cold. Once you get over the psychological hurdle of swimming in the dead of winter, you'll love it."

"And will I learn to ski too?" Kathy asked.

"Everyone learns to ski if they stay in this country long enough, Kathy." Don answered evasively, drawing her towards him.

Kathy relaxed comfortably agaist Don's broad chest, looked up into his handsome face. She felt a delicious feeling of languor come over her, felt as if she could lie here in his arms forever. Suddenly she felt a finger of guilt stab at her; she was a nurse with a patient in the next room. She had no right to be lying here in her employer's arms, dreaming of the good times they would have together; she should be at her patient's side.

Abruptly she stood up. "I shouldn't be here. I should be with Freda." Her guilt made her voice thin and reedy.

Don still held her hand. Now he tried to draw her back down beside him on the sofa. "Mel will call you if she needs you," he said. "Stay with me, Kathy. There's so much more I want to tell you—all the fun we're going to have together, the places I want to take you, the things I'll show you."

"You seem to forget I came here to work, not to play, Don,"

Kathy said uncomfortably, realizing she was actually loath to leave the room and return to her patient.

"You'll do lots of work, Kathy, don't worry," Don replied. "You'll be helping Doc Carter whenever he needs you, and that'll be plenty. That's one reason I'm as happy you don't ski—the doc would have you out on all his cases if you did. This way you'll stay close to the lodge and keep my guests happy." His voice softened. "And I don't mind saying you'll keep me very happy too."

Kathy shrugged gently loose from Don's arms. "I really must go to my patient now, Don. She might need me in a hurry—there's no telling in childbirth cases."

Don stood up and walked towards the door with Kathy. "You're right, of course, Kathy, and I have no business trying to keep you from her. After this is over, you and I will have plenty of time together."

Grateful for Don's understanding, Kathy hurried into the bedroom, where she quickly shooed Mel outside and started to prepare her patient for the long hours ahead.

Freda was still having pains, as Kathy sponged her off and combed her hair, straightening out the bed linens. Her eyes followed Kathy's every move. Kathy was trying to be casual; she didn't want Freda to suspect the feeling of apprehension that had washed over her as soon as she'd entered the room. The time she'd spent with Don had served to relax her, made her forget momentarily the situation she'd been thrust into, the ordeal that might still be ahead for both her and the woman on the bed. Kathy sneaked a look at the window now, and felt her heart sink as she realized she couldn't even tell whether or not the snow was still falling; all she could see was a solid sheet of white covering the space from the top of the window to the sill where the drapery was slitted.

"What do you think, Kathy—what's going to happen?" Freda's voice sounded weak and frightened, but Kathy was

both perturbed and heartened to note there was no real pain underlying it. Heartened that her patient was not suffering, perturbed because she was sure Freda was in actual labor. Was there something wrong that it was so mild after so many hours? Kathy told herself there was never any rule in first childbirths. No, what she should concern herself with was Freda's state of mind, her fear of the unknown, which was also Kathy's fear.

"I think you're doing beautifully, Freda," Kathy said cheerfully. "Mel's visit helped you to relax, I think. Now you just keep up the good work."

"Dr. Carter won't be able to get here for hours and hours, Kathy," Freda whispered. "I made Mel look out. We're snowed in; it might be days before they can dig through to us. Oh Kathy, what if something goes wrong?"

Kathy took Freda's hand in hers and squeezed it gently. It looked so small and white and helpless, such a bitter contrast to her swollen body, it made Kathy's heart hurt with its pitifulness.

"Nothing's going to go wrong, Freda. You must have confidence in me. I examined you and I can assure you everything is progressing as it should. You're going to have a healthy baby and your baby is going to have a healthy mother."

"I hope you're right, I just hope you're right," Freda's whisper was all but muffled as she turned her head on the pillow so Kathy wouldn't see the hot tears brimming her eyes.

Kathy settled herself beside her patient's bed now, thinking about the hours ahead of her. She kept glancing at her watch at the same time that she watched the involuntary movements of her patient's body. Freda was still in labor but it was weak and irregular. Kathy had a suspicion her patient's pains were too weak and too widely spaced after being

in labor so long, but then all women were different, weren't they? She comforted herself with this thought as she tried to put her mind on something else, but her thoughts kept coming back to her patient. She felt an icy chill as the the intervals between the pains became longer and longer, so long that Freda actually started dozing off between the pains. It's good for her, Kathy told herself; the poor girl's scared silly anyway and if her tension mounts up, it'll make the actual birth that much more difficult.

Kathy tried to think back to all she knew about childbirth and suddenly realized she knew very little. Three years of nursing and she still couldn't think of childbirth in terms of a problem of her profession; she could only think of Freda as a person looking to her for a miracle. But nurses were not miracle workers, she told herself sternly. They were just people doing a job, and to them such things as diseases and accidents, birth and death were merely part of the job like invoices and debits and credits were part of a bookkeeper's job—but she knew she wasn't that kind of nurse (if indeed there actually were such women in her profession).

She sighed. She had always felt keenly a part of every case she'd handled, whether it was a hypochondriac suffering from an imagined illness, or someone recovering from drastic surgery. She knew that people feeling imaginary pain suffer as acutely as those who are truly ill, possibly even more so because they are often told their pain is only in their mind. Even had she wanted to, she couldn't stop feeling sorry for them.

As for Freda, she knew no amount of worry on her part would do the woman good, but how could she stop worrying?

Suddenly she heard a strangled cry. "Kathy!"

"What is it?"

In a moment, she was leaning over her patient, gently placing her hand on the woman's abdomen. It was a bad

pain, Kathy knew that even before Freda told her; she had felt the deep contraction of the woman's womb beneath her sensitive fingers, knew it was laboring hard now and would get worse from here on in.

The hours came and went.

Periodically, Mel slipped in and out to bring Kathy a bite of food she couldn't even attempt to eat, or to change the basin of cold water she was using to wet the cloth she sponged Freda's face and neck with. Each time, he would assure her he had plenty of water boiling for the time she would need it to sterilize her scissors for cutting the cord. There was no longer any talk of waiting for Dr. Carter. They all knew that Kathy was going to deliver this baby.

Each time Mel appeared, his face was grayer and grayer, more and more drawn-looking, and Kathy saw how studiously he tried to avoid his wife's suffering eyes.

"Why don't you send Don in next time, Mel?" she suggested once.

Mel looked startled, as if the thought had never occurred to him. Of course, Kathy realized, it was Mel's place to come. Still Don hadn't even seen Freda since the first moment he'd set foot in the farmhouse,

"Don keeps asking about Freda," Mel explained, "but I think he's afraid to see her. He's so softhearted, he can't stand the sight of anyone suffering."

Kathy nodded, thinking that would explain the reason he wanted her staying close to the hotel rather than going off with Dr. Carter a great deal. And if he liked to have fun and keep away from the grimmer side of life, who was she to blame him? And actually, she told herself, she could use a little fun too. Hadn't she gone through enough in her nurse's training to deserve some fun?

Freda's pains began to come faster and faster, more and

more sharply, and now she was crying out, unable to control the sounds of her pain.

"It's coming, Kathy, it's coming," her words penetrated Kathy's brain like so many sharply-pointed brands.

Oh, it's too soon, it's too soon; I'm not ready, Kathy wanted to cry the words aloud, and at the same time she wanted to call herself a coward, knowing as she did that she never would be "ready".

"I'll take a look, Freda," she said gently, then proceeded to examine her again, gasping aloud as she saw the top of the baby's head start to appear. And suddenly, as if by magic, Kathy felt her fear leave her. She ran to the doorway.

"Mel, hurry, bring the hot water," she called.

Then, instructing Freda to bear down, she prepared to receive the baby's head as it started to emerge. Once it had started, it came quickly, and Kathy barely had time to help maneuver the head gently through the opening so as not to tear the skin, to see that the baby came out quickly and without drowning in the rush of fluid that came with it. Gently she cleaned the baby's eyes and mouth and nose, held it up by its tiny feet and slapped it softly, then listened gratefully to its helpless cries.

And then Mel was there, taking the baby from her arms while Kathy turned back to Freda. With sterile strips of gauze, she tied the umbilical cord in two places, then cut it in the space between the two tied places. Then, as Mel helped her, Kathy cleaned the baby and wrapped it in one of the receiving blankets Freda had prepared.

And returned to her patient.

"A beautiful baby girl," she told Freda, who smiled and promptly closed her eyes, murmuring, "I'm tired, oh I'm so tired."

Rest, rest, you've earned it, Kathy said the words to herself as she gently expelled the placenta, then started kneading

Freda's womb. This was important to control the bleeding and prevent hemorrhage, the threat of which accompanied every delivery. All the things she had learned in class were now in her mind. To feel for the uterus beneath the abdominal wall, to knead and knead until she felt the uterus harden, knowing that indicated the blood was coagulating properly. There would be some bleeding, she knew, but that was not to be feared; it was excessive bleeding she had to avoid at all costs. Kathy's arms and hands and back ached before she stopped and checked to see how her patient was coming along. Seeing that she was in good condition, she covered her up so she could rest, then took the baby from Mel's arms.

Everything had gone well up until this moment. If it would just continue this way, Kathy told herself, she could consider herself blessed.

At that moment, Freda gasped, "Kathy, Kathy, I can't breathe!"

By the time Kathy reached her side, Freda was gasping for air and when Kathy put her fingers on her pulse, it was racing like a trip-hammer, and her skin was taking on a bluish tinge. This could be a complication of childbirth, but Kathy suspected it was a reaction to the tension the woman had been under rather than the birth itself. If it were anyone else at any other time Kathy would have sworn it was a heart attack, but Freda had no history of cardiac trouble, and all during the time Kathy had attended her, her heart had been perfectly normal for the circumstances.

Bemoaning the fate that had put her with a patient without access to such emergency equipment as oxygen tanks, Kathy quickly ran out into the kitchen and rummaged around hoping that Freda was the type of housewife who saved paper bags. In the third drawer she pulled out, she found a huge collection of them. Snatching one, she ran back into the bedroom and, snapping it open, held it to Freda's mouth.

"Blow into this, Freda," she said, "then breathe back in. Blow out, breathe in," she continued speaking softly, explaining in an aside to Mel that by doing this, Freda was breathing in carbon dioxide from her own lungs. Slowly the woman began to relax. It was strictly an emergency measure, one Kathy had seen used at the sight of an accident, and she was quite surprised when Mel informed her that a supply of paper bags was part of the survival kit prospectors, fishermen and others who went up into the higher altitudes, habitually carried.

"I guess you were more scared than you knew and that brought this on," Kathy remarked to Freda after taking the bag away.

"I feel like such a fool," Freda replied, "as if I haven't caused you enough trouble all this time. But I was so scared."

"Trouble is my business," Kathy replied gently, "and talking about being scared, there was a time or two I was ready to blow into a paper bag myself."

"You do look a trifle peaked, Kathy," Mel said. "If you think Freda is all right now, why don't you go into the other room and grab a nap. I know how to take care of the baby. I'm an old hand with babies. I had seven younger brothers and sisters, you know."

The idea of sleep was very tempting to Kathy—tempting like food is to a starving man, she admitted to herself.

"I'll take you up on that, Mel," she replied. "Call me if you need me."

But she didn't go to sleep. Don waylaid her the moment she entered the living room.

"This calls for a celebration, Kathy," he said. "How about it?"

"I can't say no to that," Kathy replied, "although I sure could use some sleep."

"Just a wee glass of wine," Don coaxed. "It isn't every day Outlaw County increases its population."

Kathy smiled and raised the glass to her lips.

Thus it was that some thirty minutes later, Dr. Carter walked into the living room of the Alcott home to see Kathy stretched out on the couch, her eyes closed, her breathing deep and even, while an empty wine bottle and two glasses on the coffee table gave the sleeping girl an altogether false look of indiscretion.

IV

THERE ARE MANY different kinds of sleep. There's the immortal Shakespeare's sleep "that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care"; there's the sleep of the professional soldier on inspection, who sleeps while standing at attention with his eyes wide open. Then there's the sleep of the nurse on night duty, which isn't sleep at all but a sort of resting of about ninety percent of the senses. As tired as Kathy was, so tired it seemed as if nothing short of an earthquake would arouse her, her eyes opened the moment Dr. Carter walked into the room. It was almost as if there was a little devil on her shoulder, poking her, saying, "Wake up, Kathy, the doctor is here!"

She jumped to her feet so quickly, the blood rushed to her head and the room started to whirl crazily about her. She would have fallen if Dr. Carter hadn't crossed the room in two big strides and grabbed her by the arm.

"Please don't let me disturb you, Nurse," he said coldly. "I'm sure you're very tired." He was speaking to her but his eyes were on the coffee tables with the empty bottle and glasses, the overflowing ash tray.

"Oh, it's not what you're thinking, Doctor," Kathy blurted out. "I just had one drink with Don. We were celebrating; Mrs. Alcott gave birth to a beautiful baby girl–she's doing just fine, she and the baby both–she–"

"How do you know?" the doctor interrupted curtly, "or do you have second sight? I realize you are a remarkable woman but since you are spending your time in here and your patient is in the bedroom, it seems hardly likely you'd be in a position to make such a definite statement."

Kathy opened her mouth to speak but no words came out. It had seemed so natural to leave her patient in the charge of her husband, and just as natural to drink just one little glass of wine with her employer to celebrate the occasion. How could she have foreseen that just one glass of wine would knock her out cold? Why, she didn't even know what time it was now. Worse, she didn't even know how Freda was coming along. Perhaps something had gone wrong, something that only a trained person would recognize.

Panicked now, she forgot Dr. Carter's presence, forgot how she must look to him. All she knew was she had neglected her patient and had to go to her. Now. She took a fast step towards the bedroom and stumbled, indeed she would have fallen if Dr. Carter's hand on her arm hadn't tightened.

"You don't have to worry about your patient, Nurse," he said coldly. "I've already seen her and she's doing fine. I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner to relieve you. I feel very guilty at allowing my patient to interfere with your social life. "

Kathy gasped at both his cutting words and his sarcastic tone of voice. Why, she hadn't taken her eyes off her patient

for hours and hours and hours, hadn't closed her eyes for days (or so it seemed). It was true she'd been caught in a compromising position but couldn't he give her a chance to explain? She felt her eyes fill with tears. Angry more at herself than with the young doctor, she started mopping furiously at the tears.

Then Don was there, speaking, his voice casual and drawling but with a husky undertone that bespoke his anger.

"Listen, Doc, Kathy's been without sleep since we came here and that's been almost twenty-four hours. She just had one glass of wine and she didn't pass out from it, she fell asleep. Mel is with Freda and Freda is sound asleep so I didn't see any point in waking Kathy when she was obviously dead on her feet."

"Nurse Frame was in charge of this case and she knew what that meant if you don't, Don," Dr. Carter's voice cracked like a whip. "Do you realize that if a nurse did a thing like this in a hospital—or on private duty in a home—she would be severely censured? Just because you go through life thinking only of your own pleasures, Don, doesn't mean that other people can. This woman is a nurse. She has a duty to her patient, a duty to the uniform she wears."

Kathy felt guilt descend upon her like a hairshirt. She knew what Dr. Carter said was right. Regardless of the circumstances, she had no right to leave her patient except for an emergency. And you couldn't very well call socializing with her employer an emergency.

She murmured, "I'm sorry, Doctor, you're perfectly right," but neither man seemed to have heard her. They were facing each other now—warily—like boxers in an arena.

Don exclaimed, "I'm sick of you, Bob Carter, you and your holier-than-thou attitude! When are you going to break down and act like a human being?"

Dr. Carter's expression didn't change. "You don't have to

shout, Don," he said coolly. "There's a woman in the next room who needs her rest; besides, you're not intimidating me."

Don lowered his voice but it still shook with anger. "I'm not trying to intimidate you, Bob, but I wish you'd stop trying to intimidate Miss Frame. And while we're on the subject of Miss Frame, I'd like to remind you that she is employed by me to work at the lodge. She has no obligation towards you."

Kathy tried to interrupt, to explain that as a nurse her obligation lay where she was needed, but she might as well have been shouting into the wind for all the attention either man paid to her.

"I don't know what you had in your mind hiring a nurse in the first place, Don," Dr. Carter said. "You didn't care whether she skied or not; you took a beginner rather than an experienced woman. Were you just looking for a window dressing all along to impress your guests, or was it a playmate you wanted? Is that what you asked for—an empty-headed red-head who would abandon a patient to party with you?"

Don winced as if Dr. Carter had hit him. "Bob, don't you think I knew when I hired Kathy that she would go wherever she was needed? I'm not such a heel that I would deliberately try to keep her at the lodge when she was needed elsewhere, but you know very well that I pay her salary and I have a right to expect her to stay close to the lodge and take care of my guests."

Dr. Carter's face had softened somewhat as Don spoke and Kathy could see he regretted his angry words. Now he took a few steps towards Don and put his hand on the other man's shoulder. "I guess as usual I acted like a lout, shooting off my big mouth, Don, and I owe you an apology. You've always been swell to me, helping me out when I needed you, sending your employees out to take care of my patients even though

sometimes you were left shorthanded. I had no right to jump all over you."

Don shrugged the doctor's hand off his shoulder, his face sullen. "I haven't minded sending my kitchen help to keep house for your farm wives when they're sick, even though it's meant I had to order meals sent in from a restaurant, but I did hope that when I hired a nurse, I'd have her at the lodge at least part of the time. That's one reason I didn't want a skier—it would be too much of a temptation for her to fly here and there anytime anyone had an ache or a pain, and I'm thinking as much of my guests as of your patients."

"I'll try not to impose on Miss Frame's time after this, Don," Dr. Carter said stiffly. "I'd have gotten here sooner but that skier the patrol brought in refused to go to the hospital. I have him at the lodge now. He has a compound fracture of the arm and a sprained back."

As the men continued to talk, seemingly unaware of her presence, Kathy walked silently from the living room into the bedroom where her patient lay, now wide awake and listening to every word the doctor and Don were saying.

As soon as she saw Kathy, she said, breathlessly, "Oh Kathy, I'm so sorry I got you in trouble with the doctor. And I hate for him to be fighting with Don over me; they've always been such good friends."

"They're still good friends," Mel interposed. "Those two have been fighting like cats and dogs ever since they've been little boys, but just you try to take one's side against the other—the two of them would jump on you with both feet."

Kathy felt a little better then. The last thing in the world she would have wanted to do was to be the cause of a quarrel between her employer and the handsome young doctor. Still she knew that if she were called up to do so, she would have to take Don's part in the quarrel. Technically, of course, Dr. Carter was right; a nurse belonged to those in need of

her ministrations regardless of who was paying her salary, but still Dr. Carter could be a little more tactful, a little less arrogant. She had a feeling that while she might respect the young doctor for his obvious competence and dedication, she would never learn to like him.

She turned to Mel. "How about getting me a basin of warm water, Mel, so I can give Freda a quick wash, then an alcohol rub, before I leave."

Mel walked out then and Kathy turned her attention to her patient.

"I feel just wonderful, Kathy," Freda said. "Don't you think I ought to get up now?"

"Get up now? But it's too soon," Kathy said in a shocked voice. "Why, you'd fall flat on your face! You just had a baby, remember?"

Freda made an impatient sound. "All this fuss about a tiny baby! Why, don't you know the Indian women had their babies right on the trail? They'd go behind a tree, cut the cord themselves, then a few minutes later, they'd be back on the train again. I don't know how many babies my mother's grandmother had that way."

Kathy didn't know whether to laugh or be angry. All she knew was that she was getting awfully fed up with these westerners and their tall tales about their Indian ancestors, and if skin and hair coloring were any indication, darned few of them actually had Indian ancestors at all—at least any closer than a good friend of somebody's great grandfather!

She decided to be neither amused nor angry, merely reasonable.

"Honey," she said, "I doubt very much if the Indians were quite as stoical or resourceful as their descendants would like to pretend. For one thing, if they were all the things you westerners seem to think they were, you probably wouldn't be

here now; they'd have driven your white ancestors out when they first came and took their land away."

Freda's face turned a brick red and Kathy felt contrite. She'd said the wrong thing again, but then she never dreamed that these people still felt guilt over what their ancestors had done to the Indians.

She went on gently. "Honey, if the truth were known, I'm sure the Indians had midwives and probably very efficient methods of childbirth. In our history of nursing, we learned of all sorts of primitive methods and you'd be surprised how many of our modern drugs are derived from so-called primitive herbs and potions. In fact," she went on, warming to the subject, "some of the Indian tribes in South America right now are able to cure certain diseases that still have our doctors stumped. No one ever knows so much that he can't learn more, even from a medicine man or a witch doctor."

"Hey, you're talking about the witch doctor I love," Don's amused voice broke into Kathy's monologue. Turning, she was amazed to see Don and the doctor standing in the doorway. The doctor's hand was resting on Don's shoulder and he was grinning broadly. Oviously the two men had made up, possibly had already forgotten the harsh insulting words they'd flung at one another.

"Westerners, I'll never understand them," Kathy ejaculated to herself.

Aloud she said meekly, "I thought I'd give Freda a bath and an alcohol rub before I go, Doctor."

"Mel can do that," Dr. Carter replied casually. "She's all right; no sense in treating her like she's just come through major surgery. From the condition of her body, I'd say the baby skied out."

As Kathy gasped, he walked over to Freda and gently palpated her abdomen. "Hell, woman, your belly's as hard as a rock. You ought to be out chopping wood now." Turning

to Kathy, he said, "You know, our Indian ancestors didn't believe in making invalids out of their squaws just because they had babies. They treated childbirth like an act of God, which it is. The squaws just went behind a tree and gave birth, then went back to work."

Kathy started to giggle, then at Dr. Carter's look of surprise her giggle turned slightly hysterical.

Finally she managed to gasp at Freda, "You tell him," and fled into the bathroom where she splashed cold water on her face until her composure returned, then she took off her uniform and got dressed in the warm outdoor clothing she had worn for the trip to the farmhouse.

V

By the time Kathy walked back into the bedroom, she could see that Freda had "clued in" Don and Dr. Carter as to the reason for her weird behavior, for Don looked amused and the doctor slightly sheepish. The latter pleased Kathy immensely. In all of her encounters with the young doctor, she had emerged looking either sheepish or foolish. Now for the first time, the moccasin was on the other foot, as *her* Indian ancestors might have said.

"I hate to see you go, Kathy," Freda said wistfully. "Mel has to go to work tomorrow morning, you know. He works in the winter time for the State Road Department and you can imagine how badly they need him now." She sighed. "Of course, I need him too, but I guess I'll just have to make do by myself. I only hope I have the strength to do it."

"Oh, it won't be so bad, Freda," Mel said comfortingly. "You have plenty of milk, and I'll come home every couple of hours to do for you and the baby. And I'm sure Dr. Carter will look in on you every once in awhile."

"I'll be here, don't worry," Dr. Carter said, "but you won't need me—unless you want a partner for a fast game of checkers."

"Make it post-office and I'll take you up on it," Freda said flippantly, but she still looked unhappy.

Kathy was tempted to remind Freda of how airily she had dismissed her recent ordeal of childbirth, how she had bragged about her Indian ancestors giving birth "along the trail," but she didn't have the heart to bring that up, not while Freda looked so childishly helpless and alone.

"You're going to be just fine, Freda, just fine," she whispered as she hugged the other woman good-bye. "And I'll get Don to bring me back to visit you often—you'll see."

Freda's only answer was a hug. She was too choked up to talk. It was all very well to pretend a confidence she didn't really feel while she was surrounded by friends, but knowing she would soon be alone and with an infant to take care of was a frightening thought and one that struck terror into her very bones. What if something went wrong? What if the baby got sick and she didn't know what to do? What if she got sick? Her telephone was out of order, as it was most of every winter. There was no telling when it would be repaired, and when it was, how long it would stay that way.

Kathy didn't look back as she left the quaint little house on the mesa, but she knew what she would have seen had she looked; Freda's wistful face in the window calling mutely to her to stay. She was almost tempted to ask Don for permission to do so, but she knew this would be an unfair position in which to place him. After all, he was paying her salary and it was a generous one. Certainly he had every right to

expect her to devote the bulk of her time to his guests and their needs, even if, as she suspected, merely the sight of a nurse in a white uniform might be all they needed. And she reminded herself that in addition to the young skiing crowd, there were many older folks using the mineral springs and they could easily have need of her services. No, she could hardly look back.

By the time Don had helped Kathy don her snowshoes, which by now she considered old, if somewhat clumsy, friends, the doctor was already on his skis, with his bag slung over his shoulder, clowning around, pretending to be a beginner just learning to ski.

"Look Ma, no hands," he cried, extending his arms with his poles dangling from their thong bracelets, while he teetered first on one ski, then the other.

"Very funny, Doctor—you look almost as good as you think you are," Don called out. Then in an aside to Kathy, "I hope he falls flat on his face, the big lug."

Kathy couldn't help laughing. The doctor was really funny, and even though she knew that the joke, if any, was directed at her and her own clumsy efforts on snowshoes, she didn't resent it.

All during the long trek down to the lodge, Dr. Carter kept close to them. At first, he'd ski down the trail, showing his faultless form, then he'd herringbone back up, throwing snow at them in the process, then ski around them going down again, passing them gracefully in clouds of soft snow. Don became angrier and angrier, muttering what he would do to his friend if he ever caught him out on the slopes on foot or on snowshoes when he himself was on skis.

Before they were halfway down the slope, the sun started going down and now Kathy saw a real treat, a northern twilight on a snow-covered mountainside. Everywhere she looked she saw pure white, white that turned blue as the sun waned.

As the sky darkened, stars came out, so close it seemed as if she could reach up and grab one right out of the sky.

When she mentioned this to Don, he merely grunted and told her to watch her feet, and Kathy knew that the doctor's horseplay was beginning to get under his skin. Curiously, she thought about the relationship between the two men. From what Mel had said, she gathered that they had been friends for years. Still there was a sort of tension—or was it rivalry—between them. Was this because they were different, she wondered—Don interested only in self-gratification, Dr. Carter obviously dedicated to his work before anything else. Which, she reminded herself, was the way it should be, particularly in this country where a doctor who was willing to go anywhere in any kind of weather would often be a person's only hold on life.

"Come on, Kathy, try to walk a little faster," Don was urging her now. "We're barely halfway to the lodge and it's just about dark. I figured maybe we'd get in a little dancing before we turn in tonight."

Kathy accelerated her pace somewhat, delighted to see that now that she was becoming accustomed to walking on snowshoes, it was fairly simple to keep her balance. In fact, she found she was walking automatically, able to do so without consciously thinking about being on snowshoes at all. She squealed delightedly.

"What is it, Kathy—what's tickling you?" Don asked. "You sound like you're enjoying yourself."

"I am," Kathy assured him, adding, "Don, do you ride a bicycle?"

Don laughed. "I sure do, Kathy, but I can just see myself biking down these slopes, if that's what you're thinking about. Man, that would be a fast miracle, about like walking on water."

"That's not what I meant," Kathy replied. "It's the way I'm

walking now on these snowshoes. It reminds me of when I first learned to ride a bike. I thought I'd never learn. My mother used to take me out every afternoon and she'd hold the bike steady in back of me while I pedaled. She kept telling me I was ready to ride alone but as soon as she'd let go, I'd lose my balance and tip over. Then one day, she tricked me. She didn't tell me she was going to let go but she did and all of a sudden, there she was in front of me, beckoning me towards her, and I realized I was really riding alone. I really knew how, all of a sudden, just like that–I knew how to ride a bicycle and I never even thought about how to do it."

"And that's the way you feel about snowshoes now, is that it, Kathy?"

Kathy nodded. "It's a wonderful feeling, Don," she said. "You know, I never did do anything easily or well. It took me ages to learn to swim and I never did become very good at it. I guess maybe that's one of the reasons I worked so hard in nursing school. I wanted to be the very best nurse in my class."

"You're the best as far as I'm concerned, only–" Don started to speak, then broke off suddenly and started to sputter as Dr. Carter, who had sneaked around and behind them without their noticing, suddenly skied past them and threw a shower of snow into Don's open mouth.

Kathy giggled. "Watch your language, Don, you're in mixed company," she warned as he muttered furiously, at the same time spitting snow out of his mouth and wiping his face.

"What were you trying to say, Don?" she asked finally.

"I'll tell you later," he muttered. "Right now, I'm so mad, if I tried to say anything, it would come out sounding like the curse of an Indian medicine man."

Kathy laughed and observed, "One of your ancestors, no doubt."

Don grimaced. "Not mine, that character's," he pointed to Bob, now a tiny dot in the distance. "In fact, the way that guy operates, sometimes I think he's a reincarnation." He took a deep breath that came out like a sigh. "Sometimes he gets me so fighting mad, I could cheerfully strangle him, but underneath I love that guy. And I shudder to think what would happen to some of the poor souls in these hills if it weren't for him."

By the time they reached the lodge, the sky was black and the wind was up, howling around them like a pack of angry wolves. Kathy shivered and hugged herself.

"I'm glad I don't have to be out on a night like this," she said.

"You'll be twice as glad once you're inside," Don replied. "I never know which I like better up here in winter–the days or the nights. Oh Kathy, once we get squared away, you're really going to love it here. There's always something to do."

"Right now I'm so tired, all I want to do is sleep," Kathy remarked, "but first I want to soak in a good hot tub. My legs feel like I borrowed them from someone else and they're several sizes too big."

Don laughed. "I know what you mean, Kathy. Snowshoes aren't exactly easy to walk on when you're a beginner. In fact, they're not really easy for anyone, but there are always times and places you can't go on skis so you might as well get used to them. Besides," here he dropped a bombshell, "you probably will never make a skier."

"Why not?" Kathy's question came out more sharply than she had intended, although certainly a remark like Don's was a shocker.

Offhandedly Don remarked, "It takes a lot of time to get

any good on skis, Kathy, and between your work and me, time is something you're not going to have very much of."

Kathy wanted to tell him, and sharply too, that it seemed to her more important to learn to ski than spend her time keeping her employer company, but by this time he was kneeling in the snow, taking off her snowshoes.

"I'll tell him later," she told herself. "After all, everyone knows how to ski in this country. Surely I can learn too. And it just might come in handy sometime if someone has an accident and the ski patrol is someplace else. I could get a strap and sling my bag over my shoulder like the doctor does and ski over and give emergency treatment."

As she walked slowly and heavily into the lodge, on feet that felt unfamiliar and far away, her mind kept revolving and returning to a picture of herself on skis. So what if it did take her longer than the other kids to learn to roller-skate and swim and play tennis, or anything else that required a special kind of skill? When she put her mind to something, she could really excel at it, so there!

"And I *was* the best nurse in my class!" She didn't realize she had spoken aloud until Don lifted her chin and smiled down into her face.

"And you're the best nurse in Gunshot, as well as the prettiest," he said.

"Yes, and the only one," Kathy replied pertly. "Don, doesn't my being a nurse mean anything to you at all? You don't seem to care whether I do any work or not. Now I wonder if Dr. Carter was right, if you purposely picked a young nurse so you could have someone to socialize with. Is that what you were going to say when Dr. Carter threw snow in your mouth, that you didn't care what kind of nurse I was?"

Don's eyes darkened. "Every time that guy opens his mouth, he puts my foot in it. Listen, Kathy, when I hired you, I had no idea if you were black or white or pink or

purple, or if you were pretty or homely, or if you showed two sets of teeth when you smiled, and if you want to know, I didn't care. Miss Murdoch said you were a good nurse and that's all that mattered. Sure I was glad you weren't a skier. It's like I told you before—although I'm glad to help the doc out when he needs me, I want a nurse who will stay close to the lodge, and if you think you're going to do nothing but socialize with me, you've got another think coming. After we eat, I'll show you the dispensary I've set up for you. You'll be there eight hours every day, and on call the rest of the twenty-four. You'll earn your salary and then some."

"Oh." Kathy felt silly now at the way she had railed at her employer.

As they walked into the big lobby of the lodge, the sudden warmth of the big room seemed to reach out to embrace her. The fire was crackling in the huge stone fireplace, lighting up the rustic beauty of the room with its knotty-pine paneled walls and western motif. Aside from the massive wood and leather furniture, with brand-marks burned into the wooden armrests and high backs, the chandeliers were in the form of copper buckets with horn-shaped wooden brackets holding the lights, and the coffee tables were in the form of miniature covered wagons. Even the oversized ash-tray stands were rough-hewn three-legged stools with leather thongs for handles.

"You know, Kathy, I still haven't seen you in any real girl-type clothes," Don remarked. "Not that you didn't look cute as a button in that big fur coat you wore on the plane, and you make a very elegant-looking nurse, but for tonight, since you're technically not on duty, only on call for emergencies, how about giving my tired old eyes a treat and wear a dress for dinner?"

Kathy's eyes wandered around the room, at the few guests lolling about. None of the girls wore dresses; they all wore

smart but sporty lounging outfits—elasticized pants in every color of the rainbow, wool blouses or sweaters, many of them sparkling with sequins and pearls and synthetic jewels, and all of them wore soft leather, ankle-hugging moccasins. Realizing suddenly that there was just a handful of guests here tonight compared with the big crowd she had seen previously, Kathy asked Don where everyone was.

"A lot of them went home, Kathy. They just come up weekends for the skiing," he said. Then, laughingly, "I guess you don't realize it but you've been here almost three days. We don't get too much of a play during the week, you know." He gave her a little push. "Run along and get dressed now. I'll have Conchita serve us our dinner in the small lounge so we can pretend we're all alone in our cozy little mountain cabin. Like Freda and Mel," he added suggestively. "Won't that be fun?"

Pretending to have missed his meaning, Kathy nodded absently, then walked towards the massive wooden stairway that led to the upstairs where the sleeping rooms were.

Fun, fun, fun—every other word Don uttered was "fun," she mused. It just didn't seem right, she told herself, to be accepting an excellent salary plus room and board at a resort that probably charged their guests plenty, and then to think only of pleasure. But it was Don's fault, not hers, she reminded herself sharply. She wanted to work—she'd come here to work. Why wouldn't he let her?

She had already showered and changed into a full-skirted yellow wool jersey dress, trimmed with brown fur, and was brushing her hair, before she thought of the man with the broken arm.

"Oh!" The hairbrush slipped from her fingers. How could she have forgotten? And after all her good intentions!

Swiftly she finished dressing, then ran down the stairs to the registration desk and office she'd seen earlier, hoping to

find someone who could direct her to her patient's room. There was no one there though, so she ran through the dining room and into the kitchen where she found the cook, Conchita, assisted by a teen-age Mexican boy, preparing her and Don's dinner.

"I have a big surprise for you, Miss—a real Mexican dinner," the woman said volubly. "*Tacos, tamales, tortillas, enchiladas, guacamole*—I make like my grandmother used to—"

"Never mind that," Kathy interrupted. "Tell me where I find the man with the broken arm—I've got to see him."

"Doctor Carter say I must not let anyone bother him. He give him something to make him sleep now," Conchita replied, then eyeing Kathy curiously, asked, "Are you his wife?"

Kathy felt her heart sink. She'd been there three days and the cook, who seemed to know everything else that went on in the lodge, didn't even know she was a nurse.

"No, I've never even seen the man," Kathy replied. "I'm a nurse and I'll be taking care of him."

"Oh *si, si,*" the woman's face changed but she didn't seem especially pleased. "Doctor Carter told me Mr. Lightfoot hired a nurse. Here," she dug into the pocket of the full skirt she wore, "he give me this note to give to you. Oh!" She withheld the folded piece of paper as Kathy reached for it, saying, "He say I should not give to you until after you finish your dinner. He say you hungry and tired and he not want to upset you."

And what else did he tell you—that I was worthless and a drone and a poor excuse for a nurse? Kathy thought to herself, but aloud she said, "You can give me the note, Conchita. Maybe there's something Dr. Carter wants me to do for the patient."

But the woman was starting to stuff the note back into her pocket. "No, not to do anything, Conchita already do. Dr.

Carter show me how to wash man and fix bed; now he sleep till morning when Dr. Carter come back. Nothing for nurse lady to do tonight."

Suddenly Kathy couldn't bear it any longer. No matter what Dr. Carter thought, she was still a nurse and this was her job. She wasn't going to let him or Don or Conchita or all three of them together shove her into the background.

"Give me the note, Conchita," she said firmly. "It's addressed to me, I have a right to know what's in it."

She reached out her hand but the woman drew back from her.

"After dinner," she said firmly, then said wheedlingly, "genuine Mexican dinner. I make the way I learn in old Mexico. Grind corn in a big wooden bowl, no buy in store," She made a grimace at such unorthodox behavior. "And filling for *tacos* and *tamales,* grind meat myself—cook slow, the meat and the herbs and the refried beans and—"

"Don't change the subject, Conchita," Kathy said, amused in spite of her anger, "I'm going to read that letter now if I have to knock you down and take it away from you!"

"Hey, what's all this commotion about a letter, girls?" Don's voice rang out in the room. Kathy hadn't realized Don had come into the kitchen and apparently Conchita hadn't either, for the big woman jumped in surprise. She started chattering away in Spanish while Don listened, his face darkening.

"What did she say?" Kathy demanded.

Don clenched and unclenched his fists. "If I could just get my hands on that big lug," he muttered, half to himself. Then as Kathy repeated her question, he said, "Doc told Conchita she's to take care of the patient, said you'll be too busy. I'm going to see what's in that note he left for you."

He turned and spoke a few words in Spanish to Conchita, who promptly handed him the note, but before he had a chance to even unfold it, Kathy snatched it from his hand.

"This note is addressed to me," she said coldly, "and I'm going to read it. Stop treating me like a second-class citizen, Don, even if that's what you think I am."

"Why, I never—" Don began to speak indignantly, but Kathy didn't hear the rest of his sputtered remark. She was reading the letter from Dr. Carter and the blood was pounding in her head.

"Dear Miss Frame," she read, "I feel I owe you an apology for interfering with your vacation, and I must tell you I am truly sorry. It won't happen again. With Conchita's help, I have gotten my patient settled for the night. I gave him a sedative and he should sleep well. Conchita will look in on him from time to time and call me if I am needed, and her nephew (whom Kathy surmised was Conchita's teen-age helper) will sleep on a cot in the room with him. I'll be by to check on him tomorrow morning. So you see you will in no way be inconvenienced. Respectfully, Robert Carter, M.D."

Wordlessly, Kathy handed the note to Don. Don shook his head when he had finished, then surprisingly—chuckled.

"What a character—I'll bet he's got a crush on you."

"A crush on me?" Now it was Kathy's turn to be surprised. "Why, he despises me! He thinks I'm useless and stupid and helpless and—"

Don slipped his arm through Kathy's and led her out through the dining room and into the lounge before he answered reflectively, "I've known Bob Carter a long long time. The only time he's deliberately rude to anyone, it's in self-defense. Maybe he fooled you but he didn't fool me. I saw him looking at you, and if he wasn't starry-eyed, I'll eat my ski poles wrapped up in some of Conchita's oversized tortillas."

"I'm still a nurse and that man is my patient," Kathy reminded Don. "If Dr. Carter doesn't think I'm capable of taking care of my own patient, maybe I'd better leave."

"You're a terrific nurse and Bob knows it," Don replied. "Didn't you deliver Freda Alcott's baby? He just wrote this note to get under your skin, and by the looks of it, he succeeded. Well," he shrugged, "I should worry. I'm not fond of competition, and maybe you didn't notice, but I've already staked a claim."

"I've noticed," Kathy said grimly, "but not being a westerner, I don't respect claims. And I'm not a gold mine."

"That's just one person's opinion," Don murmured, then as Conchita arrived bearing a big tray of wonderful-smelling and exotic-looking dishes, followed by her nephew with a big pot of steaming coffee, he said, "Let's eat now. We can continue our quarrel later. Much later."

But they never did get around to continuing their quarrel.

Don hadn't been just talking when he'd said he suspected Bob Carter had more than a professional interest in the pretty nurse, and while he had originally been attracted to her himself, to no more nor less a degree than he would be to any pretty girl, the doctor's obvious interest made her twice as desirable.

Don knew this country well, knew especially of one spot no girl could ever resist—the western version of the movie version of the Casbah. After finishing Conchita's delicious dinner, Don casually suggested a drive.

"Why can't we stay here?" Kathy asked wonderingly, remembering that every time she had ventured outside, she'd run into difficulty of one type or another.

But Don was thinking of a difficulty of a different type—in the form of a handsome young doctor. If he were any judge of women, Bob had already piqued Kathy's interest, although she might not yet be aware of it. What better move now than for the young doctor to casually appear at the lodge, ostensibly to check on his patient, but actually to subtly woo the pretty nurse away from her employer? Although Don loved

and respected his friend, he didn't trust him.

"You've got to stop being afraid to set foot outside," Don told Kathy gently. "We're not going into the mountains now; we'll be right here in the foothills. Come now, be a good girl and go wrap yourself in that big fur coat of yours. You're in for an experience you'll never forget."

"I've already had a few of those," Kathy remarked, but minutes later, wrapped in her fur coat and with a sequined veil floating about her hair, she found herself riding alongside Don (still in the rented car) down the steep cobblestoned street they had come up on, then along a road that forked off and to the side. This was a wide macadam road, bone-dry and obviously continuously patrolled.

"We're going to Grey Eagle Lodge," Don told her as they drove along. "That's a new place and it's really out of this world. It's an easterner's idea of the West, complete with ski lifts and slaloms—the works. Alongside it, Lightfoot Lodge is a piker outfit but that doesn't bother me. They fill up so quickly, I always get their overflow, and along with my regular guests, that's all I need. But I do love their Skytop Room." He sighed, thinking how the Skytop Room had never failed him. He hoped it wouldn't fail him now.

Kathy felt her breath catch in her throat at first sight of Grey Eagle Lodge. It did indeed look exactly as she had always pictured the West. A great gabled building with massive stone balconies overlooking steep slides, the ski lift, colorful flags and bobbing lights breathtaking against the snow. But it was after they had taken the elevator to the topmost floor of the lodge and entered the Skytop Room that she really felt overawed. The Skytop Room was built on the side of the building where the mountain sloped sharply downward; another range of mountains glimmered in the distance, lit by moonlight like a wonderland scene. The room itself was fairly small but because one wall was a complete mural

of mountain scenery and the other three made entirely of ceiling-to-floor windows, it seemed like a mountain perch.

"Like it?" Don asked.

"It's just gorgeous," Kathy breathed.

Don ordered drinks for them, watched gratefully as Kathy visibly relaxed. Unused to drinking even the rather mild wine Don had ordered, Kathy started to talk and Don listened smilingly, the while thanking the lucky providence that had sent her here. He'd never known a girl quite like her before, a girl who was warm and soft and loving, but intelligent at the same time. A girl who made him feel romantic and wise and protective, which was altogether a new feeling for him. If he ever did get married, he told himself, this was the type of girl he should marry.

In between rounds of drinks, they danced to the music that was piped into the room from a hi-fi set somewhere in the recesses of the hotel, slow romantic music that made Kathy seem twice as feminine, made Don feel twice as protective. Without quite realizing what he saying, Don found himself murmuring into Kathy's hair, "I love you, darling," then realizing with a start that he meant it!

But this wasn't what he wanted, he told himself. There were things he wanted to do, had to do—things like hunting in Africa, climbing mountains in Switzerland, sailing around the world in a sloop—all kinds of adventures that an attachment with a woman would make impossible. Still he couldn't stop himself from being drawn to the woman in his arms, from making her feel his love reaching out to her.

Kathy, for her part, was completely wrapped up in the night and the music and the delicious joy of the moment. To her, Don was the man she had been meant for. She had forgotten all about her nursing; all she was thinking about was the man who held her. She wanted the evening to go on and on and never end.

Even after the Skytop Room closed (the waiter had been flicking the lights on and off for at least half an hour without Don or Kathy realizing he wanted them to go) and they were driving back up towards the lodge, the mood stayed with Kathy.

And the last thought that dwelt in her mind before she fell asleep that night was that Don had told her he loved her, and her lips tingled with the remembered warmth of his good-night kiss.

VI

KATHY AWOKE very late the next morning, awoke to a delicious feeling of languor. Don had told her the last thing the night before that she was to sleep as late as she liked.

"I know how tired you are, Kathy," he'd said gently. "You've been on a merry-go-round ever since you've been here so I want you to rest and take it easy in the morning. Afternoon will be plenty of time to get your office in order and start meeting the guests."

He had gone on to tell her of the room he had set up as a dispensary, which she still had not seen. This would be her private domain where she would give treatment as needed. Casually Don had concluded with, "It used to be Dr. Carter's dispensary. In fact his stuff is still in it. He'll continue to use it after the skiing season is over and you and I are gone, but while you're here, it's yours."

"I feel guilty putting Dr. Carter out of his room," Kathy remarked. "That will be one more thing he'll have against me."

"I wouldn't worry about that if I were you," Don said com-

fortingly. "The doc's really a good guy when you get to know him. It's just that he's so used to running things around these hills and having everything his own way, he can't bear the thought of a nurse being here and not being under his thumb."

"I don't think you're being quite fair to Dr. Carter, Don," Kathy protested. "He does the work of two men—and more. Surely you don't blame him for taking all the help he can get."

"I don't blame him, Kathy," Don replied. "Only when it comes to you, I envy him. I wonder if you'd stick up for me like you do for him." He sighed. "Well, good night, sweet." He dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose. "Sleep well and dream of me."

Kathy turned over in the big comfortable bed, unable to sleep although she still felt tired. She got up and went to the window and drew the drapes—then gasped aloud. It was so beautiful outside, it took her breath away. Her room was at the back of the lodge, where the mountains started their steep climb. Between the peaks was a canyon filled with trees, evergreens that sparkled colorfully against the white snow, the icicles dripping from their branches making them look like gracefully-decorated Christmas trees.

She threw the window open and breathed deeply of the cold, pine-scented air. Although she started shivering almost immediately, she hated to close the window, hated to shut out the refreshing scent. But of course she had to, and she had to start getting dressed and get to her patient—or patients, as the case might be. And not just the regular lodge patients, but the man with the broken arm as well. She told herself she'd take over his care by force if necessary!

Thus it was that as soon as she was dressed in her uniform, with a bulky knit, white sweater thrown over her shoulders, she made her way determinedly down to the kit-

chen where she demanded that Conchita take her to her patient.

"Missy Nurse too late," Conchita informed her smilingly. "Dr. Carter already come and go. Say leave man alone until he come back this afternoon. Man doing fine."

Kathy felt herself tremble in silent fury. There wasn't a thing she could do; she had been thrown off the case before she'd gone on it—Dr. Carter had seen to that.

"I'll take some breakfast then, Conchita," she said to the woman, rather more sharply than she had intended. "I'll have plenty to do before Dr. Carter returns, I'm sure."

"*Si*, plenty to do. Boss man keep nurse busy," Conchita smiled. "You like chili and eggs for breakfast? With some nice crisp *tacos*?"

Kathy shuddered.

"Just eggs, Conchita, and some toast and coffee."

She sat down at the big wooden table under the window and watched as Conchita fixed her breakfast. That crack the woman had made about "boss man keep nurse busy" bothered Kathy. Did everyone in this country feel that Don had brought her here as a playmate? And if they were correct, why did he pick a nurse? Kathy's heart sank as she realized the logic of Don's doing just such a thing. If indeed he and Dr. Carter were lifelong rivals, what better way for Don to use his wealth to show his superiority over the other man than by bringing in a nurse, allowing the doctor to avail himself of her services as a favor, and at the same time letting the doctor know that she really belonged to the lodge?

And to him.

If this were true, where did she come in? Kathy asked herself. And, the affection her employer was showing her—was that as spurious as the rest of his actions?

Well, Kathy assured herself, she didn't care one way or another. This was still just a job, and it was definitely an ad-

venture, something to talk about when she returned to New York.

After breakfast she went looking for Don but couldn't find him anywhere. As a matter of fact, the entire lodge was empty except for one gray-haired gentleman who was sitting in front of the fireplace reading a newspaper.

"Don's gone skiing," the man informed her. "He left at the crack of dawn with a party of guests."

Folding his paper neatly and placing it on the coffee table, the man rose and said in a courtly, rather old-fashioned manner, "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Murray Leggett. I lease the lodge from Don when the skiing season is over and he leaves. During the skiing season, I take charge of the mineral springs pool. Would you like to see the pool now? Some of our non-skiing guests are in swimming."

Kathy shivered involuntarily at the thought of anyone swimming outdoors in this weather, although Don had assured her it was done all the time.

"I'd rather you show me my office, Mr. Leggett," she said. "I'd like to get settled. Then I have some letters to write."

"I'd say you do indeed," the man replied smilingly. "I was just about to tell you. Your mother called here several times; she was quite upset that you hadn't written to her."

"I—I sent her a telegram as soon as I arrived," Kathy murmured, feeling guilt flood over her as she pictured her mother, frantic with worry, haunting the mailbox for a letter from her. "I hope she's not too upset. Mother's a worrier, you know."

"Yes, I do know," Mr. Leggett replied. "We had quite a long chat last time she called, but I think I managed to set her mind at ease. I told her where you were, on that childbirth case, with the doctor, so she realized why you hadn't written. But I think, if I were you, I'd get busy and write a nice long letter now." He grinned. "Your mother did say

something about coming out here and fetching you home, but I think I talked her out of that notion."

Kathy fairly flew to the little office the white-haired gentleman pointed out to her and immediately started writing a letter to her mother. Of all things that would make her look really silly now would be for her mother to come out here and demand she return to New York. Oh, and she didn't want that, Kathy told herself, not now. Maybe at first, when she'd been so frightened of the forbidding mountains and all the snow, she would have welcomed the opportunity to turn around and go home; but now, when she was just beginning to enjoy herself and—she had to admit—just when she was beginning to know Don, she certainly did not want to leave.

She wrote and wrote and wrote, a long, glowingly enthusiastic letter, which she knew would make her mother happy and ease her fears and tensions. She was so engrossed in her letter writing that she didn't hear anyone come in, and it wasn't until she heard a cough that she looked up.

Into the amused eyes of Dr. Carter.

"Writing a case history, Nurse?" he asked mildly.

Kathy felt her face flame. Slowly she arose and walked towards the doctor.

"I know I should be with my patient now, Doctor, and I would be if you hadn't left instructions with Conchita for me to keep away from him."

"Oh, you can go up later on and soothe his fevered brow, if it'll make you feel any better," Dr. Carter replied. "But for now, why don't you just get yourself acclimated to your dispensary? There's a gang of people in the pool as well as on the slopes. Pretty soon they'll be traipsing in with various ailments. Mostly imaginary; they're all curious to see the new nurse. But there are always some who stay in the pool too long, or others who walk out into the cold air and get a chill. And as for the skiers, one of them might even stub a toe;

then you'd have a real emergency on your hands. Come," he took her hand, leading her through an archway into the examining and treatment room, "I'll show you around."

It was really surprisingly well equipped for a hotel dispensary, Kathy thought as she followed Dr. Carter around the large airy room, and she realized for the first time that he had obviously used it a great deal before she came. There was a white-enameled supply chest that he opened with a key from his key chain (explaining that she would find her own key in the top drawer of her desk), and it contained every instrument she could possibly need, all gleaming and lying in precise rows on sterile white towels. In addition, there was a sterilizer, an examining table, a cot neatly made up, plus a tank of oxygen.

"I never expected anything as elaborate as this, Doctor," Kathy admitted. "I guess I should have looked around before you came, but I was so anxious to get a letter off to my mother. She's been calling and calling. I've just sent her one wire since I've been here, and she's a worrier."

"You were quite right to take care of your letter writing first, Kathy." Kathy felt a thrill as her name dropped casually from the doctor's lips, and she was pleased there was no sarcasm in his voice. "You'll actually have little to do here anyway, except to look reassuringly professional."

"I did think I'd do some nursing here," Kathy replied, thinking again that it wouldn't take many more remarks about her being here as window dressing to make her extremely angry and resentful. "And now if you'll take me to my patient, I'll start acting as well as looking like a nurse."

Dr. Carter shrugged. "Okay, Kathy, let's go. You can sit and talk to him; there's nothing else that needs to be done."

When she finally saw her patient, Kathy realized it was as Dr. Carter had said—and she couldn't even stay and talk to the man, as he was comfortably ensconsed in an armchair by

the window, reading a book. Dr. Carter explained that the man's back had been only mildly sprained; his arm, while broken in two places, was in a cast and sling and didn't prevent him from getting around and taking care of his needs.

"You see, Kathy, I wasn't just teasing you about the fellow's condition," Dr. Carter said gently as they walked from the room, "and you did need your rest after delivering a baby." His face reddened. "I guess I owe you an apology about the note, though. Don told me it made you very angry."

"I didn't like the tone of it," Kathy replied truthfully, "but I guess you weren't thinking very clearly when you wrote it."

The young doctor looked extremely uncomfortable, running his finger around inside his shirt collar as if it had suddenly become too tight for him.

"I was thinking all right," he muttered, "trouble was I was thinking too much—of you."

Suddenly he bolted from the room.

Kathy stood in the exact spot where he'd left her, stunned. If she'd felt confused before, it was nothing compared to the confusion she felt now. Was it possible that Don was right, that Dr. Carter was really attracted to her? And if so, where did that leave her? In the short time she'd known him, she'd grown extremely fond of Don, although at times she wondered if she could truly respect a man who saw life only in terms of the fun he could get out of it. A man like Dr. Carter, a man who was obviously dedicated to his profession, would certainly appeal to her more. Still she didn't believe she could possibly measure up to his degree of dedication.

And she did so enjoy being with Don.

Determinedly putting thoughts of both young men out of her mind, Kathy went back to her office, where she just sat, wishing something would happen. At noon, Conchita's nephew came and accompanied her to the dining room, where she lunched with Mr. Leggett. There was a sprinkling of

older people in the dining room, people who had spent the morning in the mineral pool.

"I thought there would be loads of people here," Kathy said to Mr. Leggett.

"There were quite a few more at the pool this morning," the man replied, "but a lot of people get tired of chili for breakfast, lunch and dinner. They take their lunch at different restaurants in town. By late afternoon, when the skiers return, plus the other guests, this place really fills up. You'd better enjoy your leisure while you can, Kathy; no telling when you'll get busier than a one-armed wrangler."

The thought cheered Kathy somewhat and she finished her lunch with more enjoyment than she'd started out with.

As Mr. Leggett had told her, later on in the afternoon, the lodge started to fill up with people and noise and confusion, so much so that Kathy was almost grateful to retreat to her dispensary. She busied herself straightening up the already immaculate room, then looked up as her first patient entered.

It was a middle-aged woman, and even before she started to speak Kathy spotted her as a chronic worrier and complainer. She told Kathy that while she'd been "taking the baths" that morning, she'd felt a palpitation of the heart and although she was feeling all right now, she wondered if she'd done some damage to her heart.

"I'm really a very delicate woman, you know," she said solemnly; "although I look healthy, I'm really not. Why, my doctor in Denver has often told me it's remarkable how I keep smiling in the face of all my troubles. He says I'm much to be admired."

You have a wise doctor, Kathy thought to herself.

Gravely, she took her stethoscope from her bag and listened to the woman's heart, then palpated her back and chest. As she had expected, the woman was quite normal, but Kathy dragged out her examination as long as she was able,

all the while listening to the woman tell of her past history of illnesses and her one operation, of which she seemed inordinately proud.

"My, you've really suffered, Mrs. Blakely," Kathy remarked and was rewarded by the look of sudden happiness in the woman's eyes.

Poor thing needs sympathy and someone to listen to her, Kathy told herself, *and my being in a white uniform makes me twice as desirable as a listener.* In a perverse sort of way, this thought gave Kathy quite a bit of satisfaction. To be able to help a sick person was a nurse's job; to be able to help a well one was a bonus.

"I think I'll take your temperature and your blood pressure while you're here, Mrs. Blakely," Kathy said now, knowing that while it was completely unnecessary, it would make her patient happy, give her something to tell her cronies at the pool.

After she finished with Mrs. Blakely, several other guests came in with minor aches and pains, and one of the chambermaids came in with a cut finger.

"A guest threw a razor blade in with the trash without wrapping it," the woman explained as Kathy swabbed out the small wound, powdered it with sulfa powder, then painted it with Merthiolate and placed a neat dressing on it. "I guess it's really nothing much but I thought I'd let you look at it."

"No sense in neglecting anything, however minor," Kathy replied gravely. "After all, I'm here to take care of people."

"I'm glad you're here," the woman said in a sudden burst of confidence. "Before you came, Dr. Carter was the only one, and a person had to be practically dying before they'd dare go to him. Of course, he's a wonderful doctor," the woman added quickly, "and I don't know what we'd do up here

without him; but a person just can't *talk* to him, if you know what I mean."

Thinking that Dr. Carter's shell fooled many people, Kathy murmured that Dr. Carter was so very busy and overworked, he had no time for talk.

Since there didn't seem to be any more patients waiting for her, Kathy relaxed and listened to the woman talk, learning more and more about the lodge and about Don.

"Mr. Lightfoot's an orphan and very rich," the woman said. "The lodge and the land both have been in his family for years and years. I guess that's why he won't sell it. Of course, he makes a lot of money from it—I understand he travels around the world all the time he's not here. He's restless, that one—needs a woman to settle him down."

She looked pointedly at Kathy, who flushed and replied, "I'm sure Mr. Lightfoot will settle down someday when he meets the right girl."

She wondered if the "right girl" were possibly herself—and knew somehow it wasn't. Oh, it might have been before she had met Bob Carter—Kathy knew this without consciously realizing that she knew it—but still she wasn't quite sure. Impatiently, she listened as the woman rambled on about Don and the adventurous life he led, only half-listening as she thought about the serious-eyed doctor and the cryptic remark he'd made about "thinking too much" about her, before he'd left the dispensary in such a hurry.

The woman finally rose.

"Well, I have to go now," she said. "I have a check-out tonight and I promised my couple I'd pack for them."

Right after the woman left, Don appeared in the doorway. Although she smiled at him in greeting, Kathy found herself wishing it were the young doctor standing in the doorway instead, with the sunlight glinting down on his hair.

"Got time for another patient, nurse?" Don said affably. "A real sick one. Symptoms: hallucinations."

"Hallucinations, Mr. Lightfoot? I'm not sure that's my field. Could be you need a psychiatrist." Kathy forced cheerfulness into her voice, cheerfulness she definitely did not feel.

"Could be—but don't you want to hear about my hallucinations?"

Kathy smiled rather weakly. "I listened to a Mrs. Blakely tell me about a string of ailments that would have put her in her grave several years ago if they were real rather than imaginary—treated bruises so small I had to look at them through a magnifying glass; I guess I can listen to your hallucinations, especially since you're paying my salary."

"I think this is serious," Don said. "There I was skiing down the slope when all of a sudden I saw this cute little girl waving at me, but when I got to her, there was no one there."

"Are you sure it wasn't a real girl? Maybe she was just teasing you and hid behind a rock or something," Kathy quipped automatically.

Don shook his head. "No rocks to hide behind. And you want to know something else? She looked just like you."

"That sounds bad, Mr. Lightfoot," Kathy said, pretending to be serious. "Do you have hallucinations like this very often?"

"I have for the past few days," her employer replied. "And I wouldn't be surprised if they got worse. Sometimes I hear her talk too, and when I look around, she's not even there."

"Ooh, that's bad," Kathy said mockingly. "Maybe we ought to consult with Dr. Carter about it. Hallucinations, and hearing voices that aren't there. Tell me, Mr. Lightfoot, do you ever get the feeling you're someone else?"

"Uh-uh," Don said, adding with a grimace, "and can't we forget Dr. Carter for a little while? This is a private illness

of mine and I want to keep it a secret just between you and me. Besides I think you can cure me."

"I can?" Now Kathy was genuinely amused. "Does my uniform have a therapeutic effect on you as well as your guests?"

"Not just the uniform, Kathy. I look a little deeper than that," Don said, leaning forward and placing his hand over hers on the desk. "Tonight—just you and me together. I have a hunch that if I can look at the real thing, my hallucinations will stop."

Kathy gently withdrew her hand. "Do you think I can close the store now, Don?" she asked. "I don't think I'll have any more window shoppers today."

"Only me, but I want to buy," Don grinned, standing up. "Run along and get into your girly clothes now—I'll meet you in the dining room in half an hour. Then you can start treating my hallucinations."

After dinner, they danced in the lounge, then walked out onto the terrace, the snow crunching underfoot.

But they didn't talk.

As though drawn by an invisible magnet, they drifted into one another's arms.

Kathy was the first to break the spell, drawing back and asking Don to take her inside. Much as she felt drawn towards him, much as she wanted at this moment to remain in his arms, to feel the sweetness of his kisses going to her head like wine, she couldn't quite put from her the thought that she was being swept along on an avalanche of emotion, an avalanche that might engulf her and take away her purpose and her dedication to her profession. Oh, he was fun to be with, and apparently marriage with him would be one continuous round of pleasure, but shouldn't there be more to life than fun? And wouldn't there be with another man—say, a man like Dr. Carter?

No, Don was no man for her to fall in love with. Averting

her head, she said firmly, "Hallucination's gone, nurse's mission accomplished. Goodnight, Don."

And left him standing at the foot of the stairs, staring after her, disappointment cutting a sharp swathe through his heart.

VII

KATHY COULDN'T SLEEP. She tossed and turned on her comfortable bed until finally, giving it up as a hopeless case, she arose and went to the window to peer out. There was no wind and hence no sound; the snow was an unbroken vista of white wherever she looked, reflecting the moonlight so brilliantly that Kathy was soon forced to look away as the glare started hurting her eyes. There was something forbidding about this night scene; still Kathy felt a vague desire to be out in it. She wondered why, then realized it was because of her work. The only actual nursing she'd done since she'd been here had been out in the mountain country, away from the super comfort of the lodge. She was a nurse divorced from the known and loved sights and sounds and smells of the hospital; the gleaming corridors, the swishing sounds of stretcher tables and wheelchairs—all the sounds of activity that never quite stopped, even in the dead of night.

The closest she'd come to feeling like a nurse had been with Freda Alcott, and now, in the stillness of the night, it was as if somehow she had left her identity up at the little house on the mountain. Down here, she was just plain Kathy Frame, a girl with a man falling in love with her, a man to

whom her being a nurse was purely incidental. Certainly Don would never take her seriously, and if she were so foolish as to tell him how bereft she was feeling at being cut off from her profession, he would not understand; worse, he might even laugh at her.

Sighing, Kathy turned away from the window, then quickly turned back. In the split second before she had turned her head, out of the corner of her eye, she had seen something. Cupping her hands around her eyes to help her see, she peered intently at the black speck crawling down the mountain road towards the hotel until she was able to make out what it was—a jeep. Her heart quickened as it came closer and she saw a familiar-looking figure driving it. It was Dr. Carter and he was headed for the lodge. Quickly, Kathy slipped her fur coat on over her flannel pajamas, pushed her feet into her fur-lined lounge boots, then ran swiftly but silently from her room and down the stairs to the back entrance of the lodge, where the jeep was headed. She had just opened the door and was taking her first steps in the crunchy snow when the doctor braked the jeep to a stop and jumped out.

"Are you looking for me, Doctor?" Kathy felt her heart pound as she spoke. Only an emergency could have gotten the doctor out in the middle of the night, and what else would he be coming to the lodge for except to seek her services as a nurse?

"I expect I'll have to do an emergency appendectomy tonight, Kathy," he greeted her abruptly. "Can you come right away?"

"I'll go get dressed," Kathy said. "It will only take me a minute."

"Make it fast, but slip a note under Don's door first. I don't want him to think you've been kidnapped in case I don't get you back by morning," was all the doctor said, but it was enough to send Kathy scurrying upstairs and into her uniform

in record time. It was no more than ten minutes from the time she had spotted the jeep until she slipped a hastily-scribbled note to Don underneath his door and was seated beside Dr. Carter in his jeep; still he growled, "What took you so long? I told you this was an emergency."

"Is there no chance to get your patient to the hospital?" Kathy asked now quietly.

"There's a chance," Dr. Carter admitted grudgingly. "If I can get his temperature lowered by morning and keep the inflammation under control, I might take a chance on moving him, but it's sixty-five miles to the hospital and if there's a chance of his appendix rupturing on the way—well, I can't take that chance." Dr. Carter let out a deep-felt sigh. "If these people would only call a doctor when they first start feeling sick—but no; they bear the pain and try to tell themselves it's gas or indigestion or something; then when they can't bear it anymore, they send for a doctor."

Kathy kept silent while Dr. Carter raved and ranted. How well she knew the type of patient he was railing at. As much as all doctors and nurses disliked a hypochondriacal patient, this type was easily preferable to the patient who insisted on ignoring warning signs of illness until it was too late. Kathy knew that the basis of such delay was usually fear; still it took a stoical person to bear the excruciating pain of an attack of appendicitis, and her heart went out to the patient she was on her way to help.

"Have you got him packed in ice, Doctor?" she asked quietly.

"Of course," Dr. Carter replied. "It seems to be helping the pain, but I'm afraid I have no real hope of pulling him through without an operation."

Kathy eyed the high snowdrifts as they rode along, thinking gratefully how lucky they were to be able to travel on an open road rather than slog along on snowshoes as she'd had

to do when she'd gone to the Alcotts. This patient was a miner, living in one of a cluster of small cabins near an abandoned gold mine. Although Dr. Carter had told her what she might expect, still Kathy was surprised when they came in view of their destination.

"Why, this is a regular settlement, isn't it?" she asked in surprise.

Dr. Carter grunted. "Yes. There are always some damn fools working that mine, if that's what you mean. At one time, I understand, this mine was a bonanza and there was regular boom town here. But that was a hundred years ago or more. Now all that's left is a few old cabins and some die-hard prospectors who think there's still a rich vein somewhere just waiting to be tapped."

He pointed to a high snow-covered mound. "All that is ore they keep taking out of the mine, piling it up until they can get it trucked down to the smelter. It's low grade—half the time too poor to even pay for trucking and smelting—but still they keep trying. I guess every time they're about ready to give up, they get enough money out of an ore shipment to stock up on grub and equipment—just enough to keep them looking for that lost vein that'll make them rich. Poor guys," he sighed. "Well, that's the way it goes out here. They never give up."

Abruptly he braked the jeep, stopping so suddenly Kathy had to grab his arm to keep from falling. "Let's get moving. We have a patient waiting for us."

The cabin they entered was quite different from the Alcott home. It was small and squat and shabby and although it was made of logs, it was obviously roughly built. Although it looked like it had been there for ages, still it had no look of real permanence about it. When Kathy mentioned this to Dr. Carter, the doctor replied that most miners' cabins looked the same way.

"That's because the buildings stay but the men move on and others take their place. They're all optimists. They have to be, to prospect in this country. Talk to any one of them and you'll hear the same thing—a gold strike is just a shovelful of dirt away."

At first sight of her patient, Kathy knew the man was desperately ill, knew too that Dr. Carter would have to operate; he couldn't possibly chance a sixty-five mile ride to the hospital with a patient in this condition.

The cabin was as rough-looking inside as out and the only light came from old-fashioned kerosene lanterns. Kathy cringed at the thought of an operation here. There was another man with the patient, a man with a seamed and weather-beaten face, who could have been anywhere from thirty to sixty years old. Kathy knew instinctively that he was also a miner and a man who had probably never missed a day of work in his life, and she realized she was seeing the real unvarnished West now for the first time since she'd been in this country.

"Well, Gus, how are you feeling now?" Dr. Carter had shrugged off his jacket and was sitting next to his patient.

"Like a horse keeps kicking me in the belly," the man called Gus forced a smile to his gray and pain-twisted face, "but it ain't so bad I can't stand it. Hell, Doc, it was worse a couple of months ago."

Kathy felt a little better at the man's words. Since this was not a first attack, perhaps it was a chronic appendix after all, she thought, in which case the doctor might possibly be able to pull him through this attack and then take him to the hospital. Looking about her at the bleak little cabin, Kathy thought how difficult an operation would be under these circumstances. No X-ray, no laboratory, no elaborate anesthetic setup. Of course, Dr. Carter had his oversized medical kit which she knew contained more equipment than many city

doctors had in their offices; he never knew what he would run into and he had to be prepared for any eventuality.

All during the hours that followed, as she watched Dr. Carter work with his patient, trying to check the rapidly-mounting fever, Kathy kept hoping this attack would pass, as the previous one had. *Maybe it's not even appendicitis, she* told herself hopefully; *perhaps it is just acute indigestion or something else equally minor, simulating an attack of acute appendicitis*—but Kathy knew she was fooling herself. Dr. Carter had seen too many inflamed appendices to be fooled, and she could see by his face that it was only an outside hope that kept him from operating immediately.

The other man, who had been bustling about in the other room of the cabin, came out now.

"Got some grub for you and the nurse, Doc," he said. "You want I should watch Gus and you go and eat?"

Dr. Carter arose and motioned for Kathy to come with him.

"I'll eat a bite, Stan," he said. "It may be a long time before I get another chance. Gus'll be all right for awhile now; he's comparatively free of pain. If he gets a sharp one, call me."

"Will do, Doc," Stan grunted.

Kathy followed the doctor into the other room and looked wonderingly about her, at the rough wooden furniture, the wood-burning cook stove. In spite of its shabbiness, it was a cheerful little room with unexpected touches of color in the curtains at the window and a potted geranium on the drainboard of the sink.

"I didn't know they had running water up here," Kathy remarked.

Dr. Carter grinned. "They don't. They lug their water from a stream. The sink was put in when a company was here operating the mine. They had struck a rich vein and

were expecting this to be a boom town again, then the vein petered out and they abandoned the mine, big plans and all. Then Gus and Stan came in. These people with their eternal optimism." He frowned and hit his hand on the rough wooden table. "They just hate to give up. Like that poor devil in there with his appendix," he pointed to the room where his patient lay. "I pulled him through an attack two months ago. I told him then he needed surgery, but he was feeling all right so he wouldn't let me do it. Even now he won't believe he's as badly off as he is. If I can just pull him through this attack, I'm going to drag him to the hospital and operate, and even if I have to lasso him and tie him to the jeep to do it, I will!"

"But you really don't think there's a possibility of pulling him through, do you, Doctor?" Kathy asked softly.

Dr. Carter looked at her and his eyes were bleak. "No, I don't. I've done a lot of kitchen surgery in these hills, Kathy, and each time I age ten years and each time I say I'll never do it again, but—" he spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "I can't sit by and let a man's appendix rupture and spill poison throughout his system, and I can't sling him in the jeep and start out on a sixty-five mile drive, knowing it's likely to rupture on the way."

He forced himself to grin. "So we wait and we watch and we pray for a miracle. Kathy, are you any good at miracles?"

Kathy shook her head and her heart felt heavy with apprehension. Miracles came in books, not in real life. Well, she'd asked for this. Not three hours ago, she'd been unable to sleep because she felt as if her nursing ability were being wasted, that she was being used as "window dressing". Well, she wasn't window dressing here, that was a fact, and if things went along as Dr. Carter expected them to, she would soon be an important part of a surgical team performing major surgery.

Major surgery—the term made her wince. She had never been able to think of any surgery as anything except major. Could it ever be minor to cut through living flesh and tissue, and was there any surgery at all, however so-called minor, that could not result in death if something went wrong? Thinking of an emergency operation in this cabin, Kathy felt cold. She hastily sat down at the table and forced herself to start eating the beans and bread and drinking the steaming coffee the man called Stan had set out for her and Dr. Carter.

Before he was halfway through his meal, Dr. Carter went out to check on the patient, then came back and started to eat again.

"How is he, Doctor?" Kathy asked, hoping against hope for the miracle the doctor had spoken of.

Dr. Carter took a mouthful of beans and chewed hungrily before he replied. "Not good, Kathy. His temperature is up but his pulse is holding steady. I'm hoping the ice will keep the inflammation under control, although frankly, I don't know. If I could just keep his temperature down, I'd feel more hopeful." He sighed. "It's hell practicing medicine here, Kathy. For two cents, I'd get out—either get myself a nice soft hospital job or else let my dad set me up in practice in Denver, like he's always talking about."

"Oh, you couldn't do that," Kathy blurted out. "These people need you too much!"

Then she blushed as she realized her own position here, particularly the fact that hers was only a temporary arrangement, and when her job was over, she would return to a well-equipped hospital, working regular hours, while the young man across the table from her was still single-handedly battling death and disease in this mountainous country.

Kathy was grateful to see the young doctor bend his head to his plate and continue eating his meal of beans

and bread. Apparently he had never given a thought to any implication behind her remark, and now this, in turn, perversely disturbed Kathy. Didn't he appreciate her at all? Although of course there was no possibility of her remaining out here when her job at the lodge was over, still it would be nice if there were some indication that her services were needed, that she would be missed when she left.

Dr. Carter took a final sip of his coffee, then pushed his chair back from the table and stood up to go.

"I'd better start getting this room cleaned up and ready for the operation, Doctor," Kathy said now—"just in case."

Dr. Carter nodded his head. "It's a lucky thing Gus and Stan are clean old bachelors, not like so many of the characters in these hills who stay in a cabin until it's filthy, then move on. Gus and Stan are like a couple of fussy old maids—it won't take long for you and Stan to get this place sterile; then we'll start thinking about operating."

Although verbally he punctuated his sentence with a period, he made no move to leave, standing there gripping the chair so hard, his knuckles were white.

Why, he's scared, thought Kathy wonderingly. *But he shouldn't be; he's done this sort of thing many times before.*

"I'm sure everything will be fine, Doctor," Kathy said aloud. "I've seen many appendix operations—I know exactly how to assist. And one good thing about appendectomies, there's seldom a terrible amount of bleeding. I just know it's going to work out fine."

The young doctor's eyes lit up momentarily and Kathy could swear there was the ghost of a smile on his lips.

"I'm glad you're here to help me, Kathy," he said. "I guess I shouldn't be worried. As you say, I've done loads of operations in homes and I keep telling myself it's nothing new. Heck, people got sick in these hills before there were any hospitals for thousands of miles in any direction, and they

pulled through. And none of the old-time doctors-on-horseback had nearly the knowledge or equipment I have."

He smiled now and Kathy realized with a start that he was very handsome, even more so than Don.

"And now I even have a trained assistant, and a pretty one at that. How lucky can a guy get?"

Just then Stan popped his head into the kitchen. "Doc, Gus is hurting something fierce. Can you come?"

Dr. Carter flew threw the doorway as if he'd been shot out of a gun and Kathy flew after him. She stood watching as he examined the man with gentle hands, then she spoke softly to Stan.

"Will you come and help me, please?"

"Just tell me what to do, Nurse." The man called Stan was obviously anxious to cooperate.

"First we'll need plenty of boiling water, then towels and sheets," Kathy started thinking aloud, trying to imagine how she could possibly make the kitchen of the old shack into any semblance of an operating room. If it hadn't been for the seriousness of the situation, she would have laughed aloud at the incongruity of her picturing an operating room as she had last seen one at York Memorial Hospital. The big white room with rounded corners so no dust could collect anywhere; the brightly, perfectly-placed lights so no shadow ever approached the operating area; the surgeon with his assistant or assistants, the trained anethetist, the nurses, the huge supply of instruments laid out on the sterile instrument tables—

Kathy shook her head as she bustled about the kitchen, taking stock of what she had to work with. She mustn't allow herself to look back—she must think only of the present; and if that seemed too discouraging, she might give a thought to the first doctors the West had ever known, the men who had carried their medical supplies in a saddlebag, who wore a

gun at their hip and rode horseback all over this country in that uneven war against death and disease.

Squaring her shoulders, now feeling suddenly brave and adequate, Kathy scrubbed away, making the rough wooden table shine, then rinsing and scrubbing it some more with the strong antiseptic solution Dr. Carter had given her. As Stan put big pots of water on the stove to boil, Kathy covered the table with sheets, then started improvising an instrument stand. Lastly, she took all the curtains down from the windows to let in all the light possible; scrubbed them, as well as all the woodwork in the room, while Stan scrubbed the floor.

She dreaded knowing that the light from the windows would be their only means of illumination during the operation, but Dr. Carter had told her they would be using chloroform as an anesthetic, which of course meant they could not use the kerosene lamps. This also meant they would have to forego the heat from the stove as well as the fire on account of the chloroform fumes. Kathy could only hope the operation would be over quickly; it certainly would be a tragedy to pull a man through the threat of a ruptured appendix, with resultant peritonitis, then lose him to an attack of pneumonia.

Later, when Dr. Carter appeared in the doorway and worriedly informed Kathy that the patient's condition was worsening, asking her if she and Stan were ready, she realized she was.

As ready as she'd ever be.

Nodding her head, she said, "Can Stan give the anesthetic? I'll have to hold the retractors, you know."

Dr. Carter nodded. "Indeed he can, Stan's an old hand at assisting the doc." He turned to Stan, who was nonchalantly surveying the room. "You've been doing it for years, haven't you, you old goat?" he said fondly.

"Yep," the old man replied, "I've helped birth plenty of

babies in these here hills and I've given plenty of chloroform for the docs too." He grinned. "Times there was no other way to knock a patient out, I used this." He smacked his fist into his hand in a gesture that made Kathy wince.

Dr. Carter managed a tired grin that touched only his eyes "That was way back when, Kathy. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Stan is making that part up." His voice turned grim. "All right now, Stan, see that every bit of fire is out; we can't risk even a spark on account of the chloroform. And you, Kathy, help me bring Gus inside."

The next thirty minutes passed as if in a dream. Stan was at Gus's head, solemnly administering the chloroform drop by drop, saying at intervals in a funereal tone of voice, "Yep, the old coot's still breathing," as if this were unexpected news. Kathy found this unnerving, but it didn't seem to bother the doctor. Apparently he'd heard this gory type of humor before.

Kathy and Dr. Carter had covered all but the actual operating area of the patient's body with sheets and towels, and Kathy had painted the exposed part with bright red Merthiolate. Her eyes kept traveling to the instrument tray with its shining array of scapels, retractors, scissors, catgut, sponges, needles and other necessary paraphernalia, when Dr. Carter held out his hand and said in a measured voice, "Scapel, Nurse."

Kathy pressed the instrument into his hand, watched as he made the initial incision. He called for a sponge, then again his hand reached out and Kathy handed him a fresh scapel for incising more deeply a second time. Next Kathy herself, in her role of assistant, reached for the retractors, held the operating field open while the doctor swabbed away at the oozing blood, then started incising further into the cavity, tying off blood vessels as he worked. Kathy saw the shine of sweat forming on his forehead and she wished she could

sponge his forehead dry (as she normally would be doing), but of course, in her present role of assistant, she could not act as O. R. nurse as well. At a nod from Dr. Carter, Kathy moved the retractors to further widen the operating field as the doctor gently moved his gloved hand into the cavity to bring up and excise the offending appendix.

"Old coot's still breathing."

Kathy realized she must have been holding her breath, as Stan's funereal voice sounded unnaturally loud in her ears.

And then Dr. Carter was tying off more blood vessels and starting the final stage of the operation, stitching up the wound layer by layer.

"You can stop the anesthetic now, Stan," Dr. Carter said softly as he started to dress the wound.

Kathy felt her head droop at Dr. Carter's words. The operation was over, thank God, and although she realized she didn't really remember any part of it, apparently she'd done all right; at least she hadn't fainted.

After helping Stan and the doctor carry Gus back to his his bed, Kathy returned with Stan to the kitchen where she drank two cups of steaming hot coffee and started warming herself by the now-blazing fire. Then, feeling suddenly ashamed of herself, she went into the other room and said, "I'll watch Gus now, Dr. Carter. You go and get yourself some coffee."

Dr. Carter grinned up at her. "Just the sight of Gus doing so well is all the stimulant I need, Kathy. This is medicine, Kathy. This is one of those times I'm glad I'm a doctor instead of a plumber."

"I know what you mean, Doctor. I feel the same way myself," Kathy replied seriously.

"I believe you do," the young doctor rose and stood next to her, so close she could feel his heart beat. "Kathy, you may not know it but I couldn't have done this without you."

Kathy looked up into his face, at the suddenly-dreamy look in his eyes. Her last conscious thought before his face lowered and his lips touched hers was that this was really what she had come out here for, and that all that went before had been a dream.

At the moment, neither one of them even thought of the unconscious man on the bed.

VIII

DAWN HAD BROKEN in the mountains and the hours had flown by and now the short northern day was coming to a close. The cabin was warm as toast and Kathy caught herself nodding several times, but Dr. Carter was wide awake, his eyes sunken deep in his head from sleeplessness. They had both been up all night, sitting beside the patient, with their bodies touching, Kathy leaning her head on the doctor's shoulder to grab a quick catnap from time to time. Now they watched him emerge from the anesthetic, watched as he made what both realized was a remarkable recovery.

"These old mountaineers are a tough breed," Dr. Carter said, suddenly drawing away from Kathy as if he too were emerging from a drugged state. "From here on out, Stan's job won't be nursing Gus so much as keeping him flat on his back until he's well. It wouldn't surprise me to hear him hollering for a shovel anytime now."

"Couldn't we take him to the hospital now?" Kathy asked coldly, hurt at the doctor's sudden withdrawal from her.

Dr. Carter shrugged. "What for? He's doing fine, no sign of infection, and you can see for yourself his strength is coming back. Stan will watch him like a mother bear and I'll come by every day until he's on his feet."

He rose. "I think we can go now, Kathy. You must be tired; you didn't sleep all night. I'd like to go by my house first though, before we head for the lodge, if you don't mind. It's not much out of the way and there might be someone waiting for me, or a note or something."

Kathy, helping Dr. Carter gather up his paraphernalia, found herself both glad and resentful to be going to the doctor's home with him; glad because she felt that tonight she had finally seen the real man underneath the tough facade he showed the world, resentful because he'd shut her out so definitely as soon as the sun came up. Oh, she'd sensed his conflict about her, as tonight she'd sensed his dread of the operation. She'd tasted his fear along with her own; she'd suffered along with him until they'd both been sure the patient would be all right. She'd shared his exaltation at a job well done; but, although she had spent the night in his arms, he was still a complete stranger to her.

As she walked beside him to the waiting jeep, watched while he sweated over the motor, getting it to turn over, then dug around the tires so they could get clearance to start, she marveled at how little he thought of himself, what a revelation it had been each time he had acted as a man, rather than a doctor. Then, remembering the way he'd treated her tonight, first making love to her, then rejecting her, she tried to tell herself it was nothing to her. What did she care if this was the way he wanted to live his life, buried up in these mountains dedicating himself to his work, denying himself the love of a woman?

While she mentally scolded herself for trying to delve into Dr. Carter's mind, telling herself it was none of her business,

Dr. Carter was himself delving into his own mind, dragging to the surface the hidden conflict Kathy had surmised.

Dr. Carter was indeed a dedicated doctor. He knew how desperately he was needed in this country; he had had no thought of ever leaving—until the first time he'd set eyes on Kathy and realized he was as much a man as a doctor—maybe more.

If Don Lightfoot had found himself unexpectedly stirred by the pretty nurse, Dr. Bob Carter found himself twice as stirred. The difference between the two men and their feelings, however, was that while Don was a man who lived only for the joy of the moment, the doctor's feeling for Kathy was deep, and as strong as it was unexpected and unwanted. That was why he had fought it so hard. It was all right for a man to bury himself in these hills (he told himself), to suffer the rigors of the long, snowbound winters, to taste danger along with his daily bread, but how could he ask a woman to share it with him? Especially a woman like Kathy Frame, a city girl who showed her terror at every turn. Except, he added admiringly to himself, when she was working. That was when her steel showed through, when she forgot herself and her surroundings and became all nurse and only nurse.

He sighed.

If it had only been a different time and a different place, how eagerly he would have pursued her, laid his heart at her feet. Now all he could do was keep his distance—and he had, until tonight when he had been weak. That was why he had shut his eyes to the hurt in hers, why now he acted cold and distant. He was afraid if he once again let down his guard, his emotions would run riot and he would find himself in the position of courting the pretty little nurse.

Which he definitely did not want to do!

"Not that she'd have a lug like you," he told himself sharply.

But not really believing it, because deep down he didn't want to.

Even now—taking her to his house before delivering her back to Don (which was how he mentally referred to taking her back to the lodge)—what did he expect to accomplish? True, there might be a message for him at home (he groaned inwardly at the thought), but he could just as easily take her back to the lodge first. He knew why he wasn't going to. He wanted to enjoy the sight of her a little longer; to look at her, maybe to get her to talk so he could listen and store up some beautiful memories he could take out and fondle in the bleak sterile years ahead of him.

For he knew now he would never marry. He shrugged and tried to tell himself it was better that way. No man could serve two masters and he was married to his work. He'd never be lonesome; his family was all the people in this far-flung mountain country who needed him, the people to whom he was doctor and father and friend, the same way his uncle had been before him.

He felt a surge of pride as he thought of his Uncle Robert, whom he had been named for. Robert Carter had been a cowboy doctor, or "saddlebag doc," as they were called in the early 1900's when he had come West in a covered wagon, covering hundreds of miles of territory on horseback or buckboard in summer, on skis or snowshoes or sleigh in winter. His nephew shuddered when he thought of the type of "doctoring" his uncle had done; digging for bullets, outdoors as often as not, with haphazardly-sterilized probes, using home-grown plants for medicines, improvising instruments and medicines both when caught in emergencies. Doctor Bob, as he'd been known, was still spoken of in hushed tones by people who'd been brought into the world by him, by elderly folk around Gunshot who swore they wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for Doctor Bob.

Some ten years after he'd started practicing in Gunshot, Doctor Bob had gone East for a visit and returned with a wife, a slim and beautiful girl, whose world revolved around the dashing young doctor.

And now young Dr. Carter felt a surge of pity. He had never known his aunt, he hadn't even been born when her brief life as a cowboy doctor's wife had ended in death, and no one would talk much about it, but the few whispered words he'd heard had stayed with him: *No right to expect a woman like that to bury herself here . . . sometimes didn't see him for days at a time . . . poor thing never fit in, always seemed lost . . . Saw it coming. Someone should have told him . . . .* and the final, hoarsely-whispered, *found her in a pool of blood . . . slashed her wrists, poor thing.*

Dr. Carter felt his mouth tighten. Of course it was true Gunshot had been a much more remote and wilder place in his uncle's day. The lodge had not yet been built, there were probably a tenth as many people in the town, although there were many more people living up in the mountains: ranchers and trappers and miners, to say nothing of outlaws and fugitives, and of course his uncle covered many times the territory he did. It was hard to imagine a delicately-nurtured woman settling here in the first place in those days, no matter how much she loved a man.

But it was different now. It *was.*

But then he looked at Kathy, sitting beside him in the rough-riding jeep, and then he looked away, for he knew it wasn't different enough, and even though Kathy was a nurse, she was still a woman first.

She seemed quite at ease right now, swaying with the motion of the jeep, her eyes half-closed, her thick lashes casting a sooty shadow on the whiteness of her skin. But then the young doctor told himself she was tired, too tired to feel cold or frightened or lonesome.

And of course she had no way of knowing what he was thinking. To her, this whole trip was a lark, an adventure she would laugh about when she went back to New York.

. . . . And you should have seen the old man up at the cabin . . . a real western character, straight out of "Wagon Train" . . . . oh yes indeed, they still go prospecting just like in the movies there, and they still use burros and stuff like that . . . . Oh but you should have seen the doctor—what a crank!

He turned the jeep viciously into the driveway of his Uncle Robert's house, which was now his. With a twist of his wrist, he turned off the ignition but he couldn't turn off his mind.

. . . And I kept trying to do my job the best way I knew how, but from the very beginning, he seemed to resent me . . . . He wouldn't even let me near my patient, then accused me of coming to Gunshot to play, and he was always catching me in some spot where I looked silly and then he'd jump on me with both feet . . . A crank, probably a woman-hater from way back when.

"Oh Kathy, Kathy, if I were just free to speak, to tell you how I feel about you," the young doctor's mind whirled tortuously, "but how can I do that to you?"

Pulling up the hand brake as if it were his personal enemy, he jumped from the jeep and ran around to Kathy's side to help her alight. His mind was still filled with troubling thoughts, chasing each other around like rats in a cage. What made him think Kathy might think of him as anything except a bad-tempered man who seemed bent on making her life up here as miserable as he could? Those few moments of rapport between them back at the miner's cabin, what were they as contrasted to the hours and days she had spent with Don Lightfoot?

The thought of Don Lightfoot was a knife in the doctor's heart. He'd known Don for a long time, ever since he'd been

a little boy. He'd seen Don go through one love after another; first his dogs, then his horses, and since he'd been grown, it had been his women.

"But he's not going to play fast and loose with Kathy," Dr. Carter told himself grimly. "I won't let him. I won't let him hurt her as he's hurt other women, making love to them, then when the season was over, moving on to other places, other enthusiasms, other women. If he makes Kathy fall in love with him, I'll make him marry her, if I have to break him in two to do it."

"Oh, what a lovely little house!"

Dr. Carter's head jerked erect at the sound of Kathy's voice. He'd been thinking so hard, he barely realized they were inside the house and Kathy was poking around the fireplace, lighting match after match, trying to get a fire going.

"Here, let me do that. All you're doing is wasting my kindling," Dr. Carter growled, pushing her out of the way with hands that felt suddenly and strangely weak. He busied himself with making a mound of paper and kindling, then lighted it with a large match he took from a copper bowl on the mantel.

"Now why did I have to bark at her like that?" he asked himself. "She was trying to be helpful, like she always tries. These may be the last hours I spend alone with her, the last memory I'll have to keep me warm during all the long cold winters ahead of me in these hills. Haven't I the right to make them pleasant?"

He threw first one log, then another, on the fire, then stretched his hands to its sudden heat.

"Kathy," he said softly without turning his head, "don't you want to come and stand in front of the fire with me?"

And then she was there, as quick as a whisper, standing beside him but somehow remote from him.

"I've hurt her," Dr. Carter thought contritely. "Why do I always have to act like a roughneck idiot?"

"I'll see if I have any messages," he said aloud, pleasantly. "Then we can have something hot to drink before we go back to the lodge."

"I'm hungry," Kathy said in a small timid voice as if she were afraid he would snap her head off (which she was). "If you tell me what you want to eat, maybe I can make us a meal. I'd like to relax and eat and get warm before we go out in the snow again." She hugged herself. "I'm so cold," she said in a defensive-sounding voice, as if somehow she had no right to be cold or in any way human.

Dr. Carter felt as if he had just struck a child. Had he made her so afraid of him that she felt she had no right to have any feelings? And did she feel that only if she could find something he wanted to eat, could she eat as well, even though she was hungry?

"Just prepare whatever you want, Kathy," he said softly. "Call me if there's anything you need. I'll just sit and relax a minute. I'm tired too."

Thinking: "What I mean is, I'm human too," he sank gratefully into an overstuffed chair in front of the fire, felt his eyes close. He was weary, so weary–he told himself he'd better get up and start to move around lest he fall asleep, but his limbs wouldn't obey him. His last conscious thought before sleep overcame him was how ironic it was–he'd been able to conquer everything in this country, to keep his patients alive and healthy in spite of their stubbornness and in spite of the rigorous weather conditions, but he couldn't keep his eyes open for what he had promised himself would be one last loving look at a nurse called Kathy.

With the softly-muted sounds Kathy was making in the kitchen as soothing lullaby, Dr. Carter slept. And dreamed. It was spring and the snow had melted on all but the highest

mountain peaks and the countryside was a lovely woman coming awake after a long sleep, shedding the covers from her body, with the sunlight glinting on her suddenly revealed skin, sleek and shiny from its long sojourn under wraps. The trees, which had been gaunt shapes bending painfully with the winds, black skeletons outlined against the snow, were now feathery green figures with rounded arms and hips and thighs, gracefully swaying with the soft breezes, dipping towards the unexpected patches of colorful mountain flowers and leaves that covered the mesas like gay carpeting. And Kathy was a red-haired sprite of a girl, skipping in and out of the picture, gay and lighthearted, laughing and lilting with the sun glinting on her hair, a smile lighting up her face as, obeying a vagrant impulse, she lay in the soft grasses of the mesa and lifted her face to the sun. Even in his sleep, he felt his heart leap, knowing this was the true Kathy, rather than the pinch-faced girl fighting elements that were still too strange for her to face without fear.

Kathy felt strangely gay and lighthearted as she went about preparing a simple meal for herself and the young doctor. She had found a tremendous store of canned and dried foods and a stove which looked seldom-used. Some of the food had not even been unpacked and Kathy thought how hit-or-miss bachelor housekeeping must be. First she made a custard, using fresh eggs and canned milk, telling herself Dr. Carter looked as if he could stand some good home cooking, then she mixed up a batch of biscuits and cinnamon rolls, telling herself that as long as she had the oven going she might as well make the most of it. Kathy had never become very fond of cooking; her girlhood had been too full of her mother's fears of her burning the house down because of one unfortunate incident when she'd almost done just that. Now she found herself humming as she worked, feeling happy and useful and at home all at the same time.

At home. She looked wonderingly about her at the unkempt kitchen, the dishes from past meals piled haphazardly in the sink, the stove and counter tops caked with grease and a rather unlovely smell of garbage in the air. If this were her home, it would be shining and immaculate. Here she would prepare wonderfully tasty meals, she would— She caught herself up sharply. What was she thinking of? This was Dr. Carter's home and Dr. Carter, although he had unbent a little last night, still obviously had no use for her. How could she be so foolish as to daydream about keeping house in his home.

And for him?

Abruptly, Kathy started putting food onto the plates, poured two cups of fragrantly steaming coffee, then went into the living room to call the doctor to come and eat. She saw that he was sound asleep and for a moment she was tempted to leave him alone, but then she remembered that all he'd eaten in the past twenty-four hours had been some bread and beans. Not nearly enough nourishment for a man who worked the way he did.

Gently she shook his shoulder, smiled as she saw him come abruptly and painfully awake. She'd seen internes awaken like that, flogging their tired bodies out of desperately-needed sleep.

"If you'll just eat a bite, I'll let you go back to sleep, Bob," she said softly. Then put her hand to her mouth. She'd called him by his first name, but he didn't seem to notice.

As he let her lead him into the kitchen, Kathy thought wonderingly of the change that had come over both of them since they'd entered this house. It was as if they were just any man and any woman, rather than a doctor and a nurse. And it was a good feeling.

But a few minutes later, watching the doctor fight to keep awake as he ate, finally giving in and letting his head droop

on his arm on the table, Kathy knew nothing had changed. It was just he was too exhausted to notice her involuntary slip about his name, as he was too exhausted now to stay awake.

Feeling his aching weariness in her own bones, Kathy tenderly pushed him up from the chair and "sleep-walked" him back into the livnng room where she pushed him gently down onto the couch and covered him with a blanket she found in a cupboard in the hallway. He was immediately asleep, his chest rising and falling rhythmically, a rather wistful smile playing about his handsome mouth.

"Sleep, you're so terribly tired, you poor thing," Kathy whispered to the young man, then surprising herself, she leaned down and kissed him on the lips. She shook herself as she came erect, shook and scolded herself for being a fool. So he was tired and he was alone and his house was a mess. Maybe he wanted it that way. Certainly he'd never given her any indication that he wanted her to make things different.

Still, after she finished her meal, she determinedly set about cleaning the house, stopping to unpack several bundles of laundry he'd obviously picked up but had not found time to unpack or arrange in closets and drawers. Her mind kept playing tricks on her as she worked. She felt as if she were at home in this shabby (and she had to admit, dirty) little house, at home as she had never before felt anywhere else. Not in her mother's immaculate apartment on New York's swank Riverside Drive, nor at the nurses' home at York Memorial Hospital—certainly not at Lightfoot Lodge. It must be because she felt needed here, she told herself firmly. Needed and nothing else.

She worked quickly, then walked back into the living room where the doctor still slept, still in the exact position in which she'd left him. And again she kissed him, again telling her-

self she was a fool—but knowing this would probably be the last chance she'd get.

She straightened up and turned then—and looked straight into the muzzle of a gun pointed at the exact spot her stomach would have been if it hadn't dropped suddenly to her feet!

IX

"WHO—WHO ARE YOU and what do you want?" Kathy stammered, her eyes traveling from the gun to the man holding it. She winced as she looked at him. *Teen-age punk, western style*, the words registered in her mind with sudden sick impact. On closer inspection, she realized he was out of his teens, probably in his early twenties, but he had the stereotyped "hood" look she'd been inured to from years of television watching. The slicked-back hair with long sideburns, the wide-brimmed cowboy hat with the sides turned sharply upwards, tight jeans pushed low on his hips, the inevitable cigarette dangling from his lips, and of course the sharply-pointed, high-heeled cowboy boots.

"That the doc?" the young man growled, pointing with the muzzle of the gun towards the doctor's sleeping form. For a fleeting moment, Kathy tried to think what she could do to outwit the young man, disarm him and hold him for the police. But before she could do more than think (and know she was utterly incapable of such a heroic feat), his black eyes were fixed unwaveringly on her and the gun again pointed right at her.

"Don't do it, lady," the young man said grimly. "Whatever you were thinking, don't try it. I didn't come here to shoot nobody, but if I have to, I will."

"What did you come here for?" Kathy's voice sounded shrill in her ears.

It could be for narcotics—people often rob doctors of narcotics, Kathy thought, her mind racing over all the possibilities inherent in a situation such as this. *Or maybe he just wants money—although anyone in this country should know Bob doesn't have any money.*

"Wake him up, lady," the young man said. "My business is with him, not with you."

He scowled as Kathy stared fixedly at him. Her stomach had tightened in a knot but her mind was clear. She knew she would have to wake the doctor, knew that she would not be able to stop whatever horrible thing was about to happen; her only hope now was to stall for time. Perhaps someone would come to their assistance; surely there must be someone around who would come looking for the doctor—or for her. Mentally she tried to will Don to come looking for her, but now the young man was becoming impatient.

He started walking towards her, his heels making a clicking sound as he walked.

"Hey, what's going on here?" Dr. Carter was coming awake now, rising on the couch, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. His eyes roamed the room, taking in Kathy as she stood transfixed with fear, then the rough-looking young man with the gun.

Dr. Carter stood up and in one swift stride pulled Kathy into his arms. He held her tightly to him, his strength pouring out and enveloping her.

"Get your bag; you're coming with me," the young man said roughly. "Now move."

The doctor looked at him calmly. "You'd better tell me what's up, fella," he said in a measured voice. "I gather it's some kind of case you want me to go on. I'll have to know what kind it is so I'll know what to prepare for."

Kathy knew the doctor was stalling for time too now, the same as she had tried to stall, also hoping someone would come by to help them. But apparently the young man knew this too.

"Stop stalling, Doc," he said. "Get your bag and come. My pal's bleeding like a stuck pig."

Kathy felt her breath catch in her throat in a gasp. The doctor's arms tightened around her involuntarily and she felt his heart beat faster, knew that now it wasn't personal fear but concern for the bleeding man that was making him freeze.

"Your friend's been shot?" Dr. Carter's voice whipped out into the room.

"Yeah. Now c'mon, stop stalling–get your bag and let's go."

"Okay." Dr. Carter picked up his jacket and bag and moved towards the gunman, at the same time pushing Kathy backwards and away from him.

"Not so fast, Doc," the man said, pointing with the gun towards Kathy. "The nurse goes too."

As Dr. Carter started to protest, the man said to Kathy, "Get your coat, lady–you're going with us." Then to Dr. Carter. "You think I'm dumb enough to leave the dame here so she can run to the law?"

"You think you had to come here with a gun to get me to care for a man who's been hurt?" Dr. Carter asked quietly. "But as long as you did, you don't have to make my nurse go too. I don't need her and she's been up all night; she's dead from lack of sleep."

"She'll be dead from lead-poisoning if she don't get moving, Doc," the man answered grimly, totally unconscious of the humor in the play of words between himself and the doctor. "Listen, Doc, this ain't kid stuff. You better tell her to get moving while she's got the chance; my patience ain't going to last forever."

"I—I'm coming. I'll get my coat." Kathy turned to the gunman. "It's in the closet—I put it away when we came in."

The man grunted, then said to the doctor, "You better make sure you got everything you need, Doc. My pal's hurt bad and I know you can pull him through if you want to. If you don't, I'll know you didn't want too." He gestured significantly with the gun.

Kathy, returning and shrugging into her coat, wrapping her scarf around her head, felt a surge of pride as the doctor answered, "You don't have to threaten me, boy. My job is healing, not judging. If it's humanly possible, I'll save your friend's life and I don't need a reason to do it. I had that reason before I ever entered medical school."

"Okay, okay—cut the talk and get moving," the man said, urging Kathy and the doctor towards the door. "I hope you're right. Buck said I didn't need no gun to bring you in. He said the same thing you just did, only different. All I know, let's move and move fast; Buck's hurt real bad."

As if in a nightmare, Kathy walked outside and towards a jeep that was parked alongside the doctor's. She kept telling herself surely this couldn't be happening, she and Dr. Carter being kidnapped in broad daylight, but she knew it could be, indeed, was happening. Bits of conversation between Dr. Carter and the man with the gun came back to her. *Buck said I didn't need no gun to bring you in.* So this sort of thing had happened before and someone called Buck had said Dr. Carter didn't have to be forced to care for a criminal. Did that make Dr. Carter some sort of criminal himself?

Kathy's mind was a mass of mixed emotions as she entered the jeep, sat between the doctor, who would be doing the driving, and the man with the gun.

She stiffened as she felt the gun against her side.

"I don't want to use it, Doc, but I got the gun on the girl," the gunman said. "Now drive like you're on your way to

church. We don't want to get stopped by the law before we get out of town."

"Put your gun away, fella," Dr. Carter quietly as he idled the motor of the jeep. "We've got one gunshot wound on our hands; I don't want your gun going off and giving us another. And I told you I don't need a gun on me to care for a wounded man." He looked sternly and pointedly at the man's gun hand, which hadn't moved from Kathy's side. "I mean it—I'm not moving from here until you take that gun out of my nurse's side."

Kathy breathed a sigh of relief as the man, cursing softly under his breath, withdrew the pressure of the gun from her side. He placed it on his lap, the barrel pointed straight at her.

"Okay, Doc," he said. "Now get moving, and remember, you give me any trouble and the girl gets it."

"There'll be no trouble," Dr. Carter said calmly. "Just tell me where to go. If there's a man bleeding to death somewhere, all I can say is you're wasting a hell of a lot of time acting like a two-bit hood. You'd better start talking and make some sense."

Obeying the gunman's instruction, Dr. Carter started to drive back in the direction they'd come from, which Kathy vaguely sensed would be towards the town, then crossed the main street at the foot of it and pulled out onto the highway. Kathy kept hoping a car would come along, but only a few cars passed them and the drivers merely waved. Kathy wasn't even sure if the people who waved knew the doctor, since every one waved in this country. She didn't realize she had tensed up each time they approached another car until the man with the gun gave a short ugly laugh and said, "You can settle back now, lady. We're going off the highway; there'll be no more cars coming, you can

stop hoping someone sees us and thinks something fishy is going on."

He turned to Dr. Carter next. "Take the next road to your right, Doc, and watch your driving. We don't want to land in no ditch."

"Black Canyon Road, eh?" the doctor said musingly. "I heard it was open this year but it's usually full of rock. I hope you're not expecting to go very far; we'll never make it if you are."

"We'll make it," the man said grimly, "and you'd better pray you do make it if you want to get out alive."

Kathy felt as if an icy hand had reached inside her and were squeezing her heart, but looking over at the doctor, she was amazed to see he didn't look particularly upset.

"I'm worried more about getting where we're going and getting that bullet out of your friend than getting out myself right now," the doctor said conversationally. "If your friend Buck told you you didn't have to hold a gun on me to get me to come, he knows me. He knows he can trust me—and you can too."

Kathy knew the doctor was talking as much for her benefit as for the man's, that he was trying to tell her not to worry, that he would get both of them out of this trouble alive.

They rode for several hours (actually not making much mileage since they were going very slowly) before they came in sight of a small cabin which looked utterly desolate and deserted except for a stream of smoke coming out of the chimney.

"Okay, Doc, this is it," the man grunted. "Now you just park the jeep and get out and walk, nice and easy now, and you won't get hurt. Not you nor the dame," he added menacingly.

They walked inside the crude little cabin and Kathy looked wonderingly about her. It was small and incredibly dirty. The

walls were of rough boards and literally banked with cobwebs; the floor sagged beneath their weight as they walked. The glass in all the windows was broken and each window was boarded up on the outside.

Then her eyes traveled to a man lying on an improvised pallet on the floor, a man who was obviously hurt and in pain. Dr. Carter walked directly to the man and kneeled down beside him.

"Hi, Buck," he said casually. "Where were you hit?"

Prodded by the man with the gun (but not with the gun), Kathy followed and kneeled beside the doctor. Dazedly she watched as he opened the man's jacket and shirt, and started examining his wound.

Her heart went out to the injured man in his obvious suffering. She didn't need to hear his "Jeez, Doc, everything's going round and round," to know he was dizzy and in shock. He had to be. His shirt and pants were soaked with blood that had poured from his wound before someone had applied a crude bandage. No one could lose that much blood without going into shock.

"This man's in shock," Dr. Carter said. "Get blankets and help me wrap him up."

The man with the gun stood uncertainly till the man called Buck said shakily, "You heard the doc, Joe. There's blankets in back of the jeep. Go get 'em."

As the man ran out, Buck said apologetically to Dr. Carter and Kathy, "Joe don't trust nobody. He was afraid to leave me alone with you. Reckon he thought he'd find me dead when he got back."

"He didn't have to be afraid," Dr. Carter answered gently. "You know that, don't you, Buck?"

Buck nodded his head, at the same time grimacing with pain. "Jeez, I hurt bad, Doc," he said. "You'll fix me up, won't you, Doc? I don't want to die."

"I'll do all that's humanly possible," Dr. Carter replied soberly. "I sure wish I could take you to my office though. It's going to be rough trying to dig a bullet out of you here."

The man called Joe came back with an armload of blankets and helped Kathy and the doctor wrap Buck in them. Dr. Carter turned to Joe then.

"Can you heat some water for me, Joe? I'll have to have plenty of boiling water."

Joe grunted. "We brought canned water. I got some heating on the stove in the kitchen now. Buck said likely you'd need it."

A picture came to Kathy's mind as she watched Dr. Carter give the wounded man an injection of morphine, then start cleaning around the wound; a picture conjured up by her mother's words when the letter had first come from Gunshot: "You'll probably be nursing men who've been wounded in gunfights." Only, Kathy thought grimly, her mother had never dreamed it would be like this. A desperately wounded man, a remote and dirty little cabin—the only bright spot in the entire picture was the fact that the wounded man obviously knew and liked the doctor. If Buck had anything to say about it, no harm would come to either her or the doctor.

The next several hours were filled with work and Kathy had no time to think. She helped Dr. Carter as he probed for the bullet, sighed gratefully along with him as he found it to be in the wall of the chest, rather than penetrating a vital organ. That meant that, barring unforeseen complications, it would be a comparatively simple operation. She helped him next to scrub the man and paint his chest with Merthiolate, then watched as he injected Novocain locally, which, in addition to the morphine that he had kept administering since he'd first entered the room, would be all the anesthetic he'd need for the operation itself. Kathy noted gratefully that the man didn't flinch under Dr. Carter's gentle handling; it was ob-

vious he was tough, and he had responded well to the treatment Dr. Carter had given him for shock. Now if he came through the rest of his ordeal as well—and if there was no uncontrolled bleeding, and no infection, and no further shock —perhaps she and Dr. Carter would be permitted to leave.

Kathy's heart sank suddenly as she realized that even if they were permitted to leave, they had no means of getting away from the little cabin, having come in the jeep with the man called Joe. She felt tears start to sting her eyes when Dr. Carter's voice lashed out, "Kathy, I'm talking to you. Hold these retractors; I'm going in after the bullet."

And then she was thinking of nothing but the work at hand, watching Dr. Carter scrub his hands, pouring strong antiseptic over them, watching as he picked up a scalpel and made the incision. She came in with the retractors then, holding the wound open as Dr. Carter quickly tied off the bleeders, then felt her breath catch in her throat as he reached for the forceps. If he could just get the bullet out without any trouble, perhaps the man would pull through. She didn't see the bullet come out. Her eyes were on the patient's face, watching his measured breathing, grateful to see no changes there, even when a tinkling sound told her that Dr. Carter had secured the bullet and dropped it into a tin pan he had set out previously.

"He got it, thank God he got it," Kathy said breathlessly to herself.

She watched as Dr. Carter went through the final phases of the operation, pouring powdered sulfa into the wound before finally closing it up and applying a sterile dressing.

He ripped the rubber gloves from his hands finally and said to Kathy in a soft voice, "Now we wait. He should be all right. We can only wait and see."

"Yeah," Joe's voice intruded roughly, "you just better hope he'll be all right. If he dies—" His voice died in his throat but

the ominous threat in it hung in the air of the cabin like a poisonous cloud.

Kathy shuddered.

"He won't die," Dr. Carter whispered comfortingly to her. "He's a sick boy but he's not going to die. I won't let him."

All through the waning day and into the night, Kathy and Dr. Carter and Joe sat watching Buck as he dozed fitfully. After the first few hard hours, Kathy knew he was out of danger. Weak, and still in considerable pain, the natural resources of his body were now rallying, helping the healing process now taking place.

Suddenly Kathy realized she was very hungry. She'd stopped being tired long ago; she told herself grimly it had been so long since she'd slept, she'd all but forgotten how. But that pain in her stomach—now that the worst of her fear was gone, she knew it had to be hunger.

"Is there anything to eat, Joe?" she asked now, hesitantly.

He looked blankly at her, as if he were suddenly realizing the time and place, the fact that he was hungry too.

"Yeah," he answered finally, "we got some survival kits in the jeep. You and the doc watch Buck. I'll go get 'em."

As soon as the man walked out, Kathy moved across the floor to the doctor.

"What's going to happen, Bob?" she whispered. "What are they going to do with us? And even if they let us go, how will we get back to town? We have no car and no snowshoes or anything."

The doctor forced a smile to his tired face. "Let's just hope Buck gets his strength back soon. We'll be all right then. I don't know what kind of trouble he's in, but once he can travel, all he has to do is call the sheriff from the first town he hits. He'll do that, Kathy. It's kind of a tradition out here, has been ever since the first saddlebag doc slid his rifle into its sheath and his satchel into his saddlebag. The doc treated

everyone—miners, ranchers, outlaws, horse thieves—and everyone protected him. Buck knows I have to report what I've done, but he also knows that by the time the sheriff gets here, it'll be too late to track him down. He'll have had several hours head start with no one knowing in what direction he's headed. There's a lot of country around these parts, Kathy, much of it completely uncharted. Once Buck and Joe get back in the hills, it would take an army to smoke them out. So you see, you can stop worrying."

Kathy sank gratefully back on her heels. It seemed so simple the way Dr. Carter said it, she wondered why she hadn't thought of it herself. Of course, he had to report treating a gunshot wound—that was the law—but as the rigorous weather conditions in this country made life difficult and rugged under ordinary circumstances, under extraordinary circumstances such as these, they could prove a blessing in disguise, since the two men need have no fear of being caught on account of the doctor's action in reporting them. As long as the wood for the fire held out, and the food contained in the survival kits, she and Dr. Carter would just wait for the sheriff to come and get them.

And then she would be back at the lodge, safe and sound and warm, and, she promised herself, she would never leave it again until it was time for her to get on a plane headed back towards New York City.

X

It was two days and two nights later that Buck was strong enough to travel. Since the time Kathy had realized she would

be able to leave, she had found herself strangely relaxed and happy. She was warm and she had enough to eat and, she finally admitted to herself, she was with the man she loved. The young doctor, facing an enforced but much-needed rest, was relaxed too. He had known for some time that he was in love with the pretty nurse and while he still told himself she was not for him, a man couldn't keep his guard up forever, could he? Especially when he was thrown so close to her. She was everywhere he looked when he was awake, as well as in his dreams while he slept.

By the time Joe was packing the jeep to go, Kathy and the doctor were mooning about the cabin like star-crossed lovers, totally unconscious of the change that had come over them since the first moment they'd set foot in the place. Even the hard-boiled Joe had noticed and quipped as the men were getting ready to leave, "Hey, Doc, you sure you want us to call the sheriff to come and get you? Maybe you and your girl want to hole up here till spring."

Suddenly and surprisingly, the doctor laughed. He felt his arm go about Kathy's waist and draw her close to him. He pretended not to notice the two men looking curiously at him.

"You know, fellows," he said casually, "if there were enough wood and food in this cabin, I'd say that might not be such a bad idea." He smiled fondly down at Kathy. "What do you think, Kathy? Would you like to stay here till spring?"

Without thinking, Kathy replied, "I'd love it, Bob."

As Joe started to laugh, Buck shoved him roughly towards the door. "Cut it out," he hissed. "Can't you see the doc wants to be alone with his girl?"

The man called Joe hooted, "Fat lot of good that'll do him. Sure, she's all soft and romantic now, but you just wait till she gets back to town. She'll be like the rest of them eastern

broads—saying ain't it scenic and picturesque out here, but scared to death 'n can't wait to get home."

"Yeah." Buck sighed and shook his head. "My old man told me about the doc's uncle and his wife. She was an easterner. Killed herself because she couldn't take it out here."

Joe shrugged. "Well, the doc had his fun for a few days. Now they'll have at least another twenty-four hours to play house before the sheriff comes and wakes them up. I hope the doc makes the most of it—it'll be the last chance he gets."

The two men rode along, each busy with their own thoughts (Joe was more of a realist than a romanticist), while back in the cabin, the doctor and the nurse were finally alone with each other.

And they never once peered through the cracks in the windown to see if they could spy the sheriff coming.

"I love it here, Bob darling," Kathy said after a day and a night had flown by. "I wish we could stay here forever and ever."

Bob's arms tightened about her. "I feel the same way, dear. In fact, it's hard to believe we won't. I keep forgetting there ever was a time we weren't here, alone together, with the rest of the world shut out. Say Kathy," he tilted her face and smiled down at her, "do you suppose maybe we've been here all along? I mean, all that hassling down at the lodge when I acted like such an idiot and was jealous because I thought you were in love with Don, maybe that was two other people in another time or dimension, and you and I have been here all along, waiting to wake up."

Kathy giggled. "Like the frog prince and the princess." Then she grabbed his hand and pressed it to her cheek, looking away from him as she spoke. "It's been lovely, Bob, but I guess we both know it's not real. We'll wake up and everything will be the same as it was before."

The doctor answered in a suddenly flat voice. "Yes, I guess

you're right," then rose and walked to the window and peered out.

"Do you see anything?" Kathy's voice was as flat as the doctor's had been a moment before.

The doctor turned, looking at a spot over Kathy's head as he answered, "Yes, there's a jeep coming. We'd better start getting ready. It'll be a long ride back to civilization."

A long ride but a short fall, Kathy thought sadly as she packed the few remaining tins of food and water and the cakes of hard bread the men called "bannock" into the remaining survival kits, and started putting on her coat.

For a while she had forgotten everything except that she was a woman and Bob was a man and they were together and in love and nothing else mattered. But then something had happened and Bob had left the lovely place they'd entered together, had gone back into the world where he was a much needed and highly competent doctor and she was just a romantic interlude in his busy, purposeful life.

How could she have thought he loved her?

Kathy stamped noisily into her boots, telling herself she had been a fool to ever think the doctor would unbend enough to love any woman. Mentally she started composing a speech to her employer, Don Lightfoot, telling him she wanted to leave immediately. Too much had happened to her in this country, and none of it was what she had expected.

Especially falling in love with a man who didn't love her!

"Hey, so you finally made it," the doctor greeted the sheriff with forced cheerfulness as the latter drove up, but his heart was heavy.

He didn't look back at the cabin as he walked out into the road and helped Kathy into the jeep, then climbed in beside her. It was easy enough to keep his eyes on the road as they drove along, to tell the sheriff about what had happened, to

listen as the sheriff told him the entire ordeal had been completely unnecessary.

"Buck thought he'd shot this guy, you see . . . a drunken cowhand from one of the ranches up-country . . . had a gun, started shooting . . . saw too many of them eastern-made TV shows, I reckon . . . . Buck tried to take the gun away from him—that's how he got shot himself. The cowhand fell down, but he wasn't shot—just passed out; reckon Buck thought he'd killed him." The sheriff sighed. "Buck's on parole—can't afford to get caught in a scrape. What a crazy kid, starting all kinds of trouble because he doesn't stop and think."

Starting all kinds of trouble. How well he knew the truth of that, the doctor thought. Well, it could have been worse. He could have asked Kathy to marry him and she, as taken with the mood and the hour as he, might have said yes and then where would he have been? One part of him tingled at the thought of being married to the pretty nurse, to look down through the vista of the years ahead of him, seeing Kathy at every turn, then his mind went to a mental picture he'd carried with him all the years of his life as a modern "saddlebag doc", a picture of a woman lying in a pool of blood, dying of self-inflicted wounds. It wasn't Kathy—although now, in his mind, the face was her face, the pool of blood, her blood, the slashed wrists her wrists.

He groaned inwardly. He could leave these mountains, leave the people who needed him. But even as he dreamed of a city practice, a comfortable home with a loving wife and, yes, children, greeting him at the end of the day, he knew this was not for him. He'd been born in these mountains and he'd die in these mountains, buried up on boot hill with his forebears.

Kathy concentrated on the road ahead of her, not letting herself think. She forced herself to listen to every word the sheriff was saying, at the same time resenting his words be-

cause they all confirmed the thoughts in her mind; this was rough and rugged country and thank God for a man like Dr. Carter, without whom a man like Buck—and too many others—would die before they had a chance to live. If the sheriff realized that Kathy had played a part in Buck's operation and subsequent recuperation, he didn't mention it. Obviously he shared Bob's estimate of her, knew she didn't belong here.

And then they were in view of the lodge and the door was open and people were pouring out of it. Don and Conchita and Conchita's nephew and Mr. Leggett and—Kathy's heart took a sudden dive—Kathy's mother.

Mrs. Adeline Frame pushed by Dr. Carter and grabbed Kathy before she barely had time to alight from the jeep.

"Where have you been? Are you all right? I've been so worried. I've been out of my mind!" The words fell from her mouth in a tumbling stream. "I called and called and called and no one could even tell me where you were except you had disappeared in the middle of the night. It was only yesterday some grubby old men came in and told us they had seen you four days ago with that horrible doctor. Kathy, I knew I shouldn't have let you come here! Oh, my poor child, what you must have gone through!"

As much as she pitied her mother at this moment, Kathy felt herself tremble with rage and embarrassment.

"Mother, it's not what you're thinking," she said, then was horrified to hear both tears and laughter forcing their way into her voice. Tears, because her mother had suffered, laughter because of her mother's distorted ideas. And underneath it all, this terrible rage! Someway, somehow, her mother had to be made to realize she was no longer a child!

"Now, Adeline, calm yourself, I told you Kathy was in good hands," Murray Leggett drew Kathy's mother away from her daughter with firm and strangely possessive hands. "You can

see for yourself she's all right and you haven't a thing to worry about. Now how about listening to her side of the story."

Kathy noted with amazement that her mother stayed in Mr. Leggett's arms as if she were at home there, still her voice went on and on. "I'm taking her home, Murray, and on the next plane, regardless of what you say. She's my baby. God knows what she's gone through all this time—held prisoner in some horrible little cabin, probably with nothing to eat—cold and," here she gulped and glared at Bob, "at this monster's mercy."

Bob flushed and Kathy started to giggle but it was Don who spoke, suspicion and resentment in his voice.

"Yes, what did go on between you and Kathy, Bob? I'll bet you planned all this to take her away from me. Well, you're not going to get away with it. I brought her here; I saw her first. Kathy's mine. I love her and—and I intend to marry her."

He stopped talking suddenly, wondering what had made him say that last bit about marriage. Yes, he was attracted to Kathy, and for a while he'd even imagined he was in love with her, but marriage—that was another thing again.

"My daughter's not marrying you or anyone else in this godforsaken country," Kathy's mother shrilled. "She's going home with me before something else terrible happens."

Kathy tried to interrupt, to tell her mother she would not be dragged away from here like a little child, but no one paid her any attention. She turned to Bob, trying to get some support from him, but he moved away from her.

It was then that Don moved towards her and spoke softly. "Kathy, please forgive me for what I said. I know nothing happened between you and Bob. And I think everyone else knows it too."

"Nothing happened, Don—nothing at all," Kathy said dully.

Nothing happened—nothing except some of the most beautiful hours of my life.

"Will you marry me then, Kathy?" Don said softly, telling himself that since he'd started this talk of marriage, he'd have to follow through or else hurt Kathy, which was the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

"No, Don, I won't marry you because I don't love you," Kathy replied firmly. "But I am going away. Not back home with mother—I won't be dragged home like a naughty child—but I can't stay here any longer."

Don experienced a feeling of relief, but it was overshot with pain. He forced himself to look away from the misery in Kathy's eyes, and found himself staring into the deep sorrow in Bob Carter's eyes.

And sudenly he became very angry.

"You damned fool," he shouted at the doctor. "Are you just going to stand there and let Kathy go out of your life? Why don't you admit you love her like she loves you?"

"No, Don, no—I don't love Bob," Kathy protested.

Then burst into tears.

Bob looked dazedly from Don to Kathy, then to Kathy's mother, who had moved to Kathy and put her arms around the girl's shaking shoulders. Kathy's words, her protests at being dragged home like a recalcitrant child, came to his ears; he wanted to rush to her and beg her to stay here and be his wife, but he felt rooted to the spot.

For what Kathy's mother was saying made a terrible kind of sense; it was the same thing he'd been telling himself over and over ever since he had first set eyes on the pretty nurse.

"You're a city girl, honey. You'd be miserable out here. This is no life for you, Kathy—give it up. Come home with me to your own kind of people, your own kind of life."

Bob had turned his back and started to walk away when

suddenly he heard Kathy's voice, still tear-laden but with a new strength in it.

"Maybe you're right, Mother," she said. "Maybe Gunshot is no place for me, but neither is New York City. I've changed a lot since I've been here—I've seen a lot, I've done a lot. Do you think I could go back to an overheated apartment in an overpopulated city now—spend my life in a beautifully equipped hospital, arranging flowers in vases and writing temperatures on charts? Mother, I've done real nursing here and this is what I want!" Raising her voice over her mother's protests, Kathy went on forcefully. "I agree with you, there's no place for me here and I'm not going to stay here. In a few months, I'll be twenty-one, then I'm going to join the nursing corps. I'm a nurse, a real one, and I'm going to stay one whether you like it or not!"

Adeline Frame's mouth dropped open at her daughter's tirade. For once she was speechless.

Kathy turned defiantly then and walked towards the entrance to the lodge. At the doorway, she hesitated a moment, then turned back and walked inside. So this was really goodbye; she would never see this country or Bob Carter again. She lifted her chin defiantly. Well, it proved one thing anyway: he never had loved her or he wouldn't let her walk out of his life like this.

She ran quickly up the stairs to her room and started jamming her possessions into her suitcase. She was mopping angrily at her suddenly-streaming eyes when a firm knock sounded on the door. Kathy was about to shout at whomever it was to go away and leave her alone when the door opened noisily and abruptly and Bob Carter strode into the room.

And suddenly she was in his arms, feeling a wonderfully pleasurable pain from the pressure of his hands on her arms.

"You're not joining any nursing corps, Kathy; I won't let you." Bob's voice was as firm as Kathy's voice had been a

moment before. "I love you and I know you love me. We're going to get married and I'm never going to let you out of my sight again."

Kathy looked up into his face. She clenched her fists to keep herself from touching him, from stroking away the worry-lines that had suddenly appeared in his forehead over his serious dark eyes.

"You're sure of yourself, aren't you, Doctor?" she said softly. "Bob Carter, boss of the hills and all the souls in them. Well, I'm not one of your hill people you can push around, and I'm not at all sure I care to stay here!"

"You don't have to stay here, Kathy." Bob's voice sounded suddenly weak and chastened. "Just say you'll marry me. We'll go away to a city somewhere. I'll get a job in a hospital—or maybe go into practice with a group of doctors." His voice trailed off uncertainly as he felt himself torn between the woman he loved and his duty, but for once, he told himself, he would forget his duty and follow his heart.

Suddenly Kathy couldn't bear the look of pain on his face. She felt tears pushing their way into her voice as she replied, "No, Bob, I'm not leaving here—not today, not tomorrow, not ever. I'll marry you, but on one condition only—that we stay where we're needed. You need me and I need you and the people need us both. Maybe it'll be tough on me at first but I'll show you I can take it, and love it too."

Bob's only answer was to hold her close to him. Looking over her head, he saw Kathy's mother framed in the doorway with Murray Leggett standing beside her. Bob frowned at Mrs. Frame, as if daring her to protest.

As Mrs. Frame opened her mouth to speak, Mr. Leggett turned her face to his and said rather loudly, "Well, my dear, it would seem you're not leaving as soon as you expected. You'll certainly want to stay for Kathy's wedding, and after that, *quien sabe?* But for now, let's go to the pool with the

rest of our contemporaries and leave the young folks to themselves."

Adeline Frame gasped, then replied in a voice that sounded more like her daughter's than her own, "Yes, Murray."

And followed him down the stairs.

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